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CHAINED LIGHTNING

A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN MEXICO

RALPH GRAHAM TABER

1. Fiction, American

A Merry Christmas
to [illegible]
Williams
from
Mabel
12/15

CHAINED LIGHTNING

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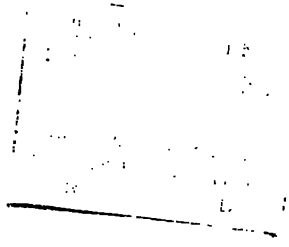

Popocatepetl, from the Yautepec trail.

CHAINED LIGHTNING

A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN MEXICO

BY

RALPH GRAHAM TABER

Author of "Stray Gold," etc.

ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY
The Author and his friend M. Ravelle

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TO MY MANY RAILROAD FRIENDS

Who are scattered broadcast
wherever the wires are strung,
from Maine to California,
Panama to Hudson Bay,

A Comrade's Greeting,
from
"FILE T."

To "J. S. R."

You will discover how much is true
In the yarn that I have spun,
For "Bell and Larry" were known to you
In the days when their spurs were won.

Will you forgive me, old friend of mine —
The dearest my boyhood knew —
If, for the sake of "auld lang syne,"
I dedicate this to you?

R. G. T.

FOREWORD

The descriptions embodied in this narrative are accurate, having been drawn from notes made at the times and places described.

Although this "Travelogue" is based upon incidents and adventures of several years ago, a recent winter spent in revisiting these scenes in Mexico has demonstrated that there has been no improvement in general conditions; rather the reverse: the scattered bands of "Insurrectos," finding strength in union during recent years, have kept their unfortunate country plunged in the horrors of protracted civil wars. That is the only noticeable difference.

R. G. T.

SAINT PAUL,
1915.

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CHAINED LIGHTNING

PART I

KEY AND SOUNDER

CHAPTER I

THE KEY

By which is shown how men are made and unmade, and how one of them narrowly escaped unmaking.

YOUNG men are by nature adventurous, and the most adventurous young men in the world may be found among that little heard of but important body of youths who have chosen railroad telegraphy as the first rung upon the ladder of their lives' work. It is a profession which inevitably instils the love of travel and the desire for adventure. Its members are in constant communication with fellow workers at distant points whom they may never meet in the flesh, but with whom nonetheless they are on terms of friendly fa-

miliarity. In dull moments when the wires are idle they while away the time by exchanging word-paintings of each other's environments, with the history of local happenings and comments on current events; and by each vibrant touch upon the delicately recording keys is transmitted an insight into the sender's characteristics, thoughts, motives, and emotions, almost as clear and expressive as might be conveyed by noting the changing expressions of his countenance.

This alone would be sufficient to infuse a desire to visit the scenes and to meet, face to face, the colabourers whom the imagination already pictures as familiar friends. In some small degree each telegrapher experiences the feeling of a blind man who, though his mind may grasp the nature of the beauty that surrounds him, by that very consciousness is made the more eager to obtain his sight.

But there are other influences which, even in a greater degree, encourage the desire to roam. The first lesson an operator is taught is to render implicit obedience to imperative commands; the second is self-reliance. Upon his accuracy and punctuality constantly depend the lives of others; and rapidity of thought, promptness of action and certainty of execution become second nature to him. If the

weight of his responsibility does not crush him, it transforms him by degrees into a sort of moral giant, with whose growth and development promotion follows and responsibility is proportionately increased. His character broadens and develops. Constant association with danger teaches him, not to underestimate it, but to regard himself as its master. Constant contact with the outer world teaches him to regard the world as his home.

So much is necessary in order to understand the influences which helped to form the characters of two young men who, at the time our story opens, were not unlike thousands of others scattered broadcast over the great American continent, and who, sitting alone in the dingy offices of wayside railway stations, are yet able to place a finger upon the electric pulse and note the heartbeats of a hemisphere.

It was in one of these lonely offices of a single-track railway that crossed the monotonous prairies of a western State that Maurice Belville was seated one bleak October evening. The last train for the night had passed his station and his work for the day was ended; but he had not asked the despatcher's office for the " G.N." signal that would release him

from duty till the morning. Of what use was such a dismissal, when the only places that offered entertainment were the equally dingy office of the grain elevator across the siding and the general merchandise store beyond the water-tank at the intersection of the township roads! It was a weary existence, the monotony of which would have been more bearable were it not for the very interruptions that might have been supposed to relieve it. The punctually recurring glimpses of the outer world afforded by passing trains served but to accentuate the loneliness of the intervening hours, which the duties of his office, distend them as he might, scarcely could be made to modify.

"Os — os — os," sounded the instrument at his elbow. He recognised the impatient touch of John Larue, the operator at Red Prairie, two stations down the line. He opened his key and responded: "L-o, Larry!"

"Knew me, did you?" wired Larry. "How are things at Plainfield?"

"Wildly hilarious, as usual. Any news?"

"Same old grind; but it isn't going to last."

"What do you mean?"

"G.W."

"G.W." meant "Ground the wire." Though the ground wire was supposed to be resorted to only in emergencies or to test the line under the dispatcher's direction, it was sometimes employed to enable the exchange of confidential communications; for by connecting it with the eastern pole of an instrument, anything that a friend to the westward might have to say could not be heard in the dispatcher's office to the east.

"O. K. What's up?" inquired Belville, when he had made the connection.

"Mexico's up," replied Larue. "I've a letter from Scott, who left 'HY' last August. He's caught on at a place called Jimulco; says the salaries are a hundred a month, and to come on down there and collect one."

"And you are really going?"

"I've written my resignation."

Here was news indeed! Though Belville and Larue had never met, they had held many long conversations, sharing their grievances, hopes and desires and exchanging words of encouragement and sympathy. And now Larue would desert him for Mexico. Mexico! What visions that one word conjured!

"I'll send you Scott's letter," clicked the sounder, "and write you all about it. And say: what's the matter with you going, too?"

Belville's hand trembled as it spelled his reply: "I'll think it over. G.W. off." For he did not dare to keep the ground wire on longer.

After closing his key the sounder was silent a moment, but as he removed the ground connection it ticked away furiously: "Os — os — os — os —"

"I-i — os."

It was the dispatcher's office. "What do you mean by leaving without your good night?" demanded the irate official; and then, without waiting for a reply: "Show red light to flag special bound west."

Belville hung out the signal; and for the following fifteen minutes his pencil flew over his pad, recording reports for the superintendent, who was making a flying trip over the road. When he had finished receiving, he went to the door and glanced up the track. The special was not yet in sight. Returning to his desk, he sat a few minutes going over his copy; then he leaned back in his chair to wait.

Why not have a few more words with Larry? He put on the ground connection and was about to

call his friend, when a whistle sounded sharply. Gathering his messages, he reached the door as the engine drew up, with a single private car. A tall man, with iron-grey hair and moustache, descended to the depot platform, and the conductor followed.

"The superintendent, sir?" asked Belville.

"Yes," said the tall man, taking the messages from his hand; "I'll speak to the dispatcher a moment."

The tall man entered the office, and Belville turned to the conductor, whom he had spoken to before perhaps twice, but whom he had seen some hundreds of times and with whom, therefore, he felt somewhat acquainted.

"Do you go through with the car, sir?" he asked.

"To the end of the division."

"Have you ever been to Mexico?" Belville felt the irrelevancy of the question and flushed as he asked it.

"Mexico?" inquired the conductor, with a laugh. "Why, no; but I have a friend there. He writes me a letter occasionally — a land of volcanoes and orange-groves; of black-eyed señoritas, gold-mines, bull-fights, red-peppers and stilettos. Oh, Mexico is a fine land to go to — and a good one to get back home from."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because every railway tramp in the country is bound for Mexico, or has been there."

"Ready," said the superintendent, appearing beside them.

"Ready, sir," replied the conductor. "Good night, my boy; and good dreams to you — of Mexico — ha, ha — Mexico!"

Belville watched them spring aboard the car; and as the engine whisked it away into the darkness, the conductor waved his lantern to him. Then he went back into the little office that looked dingier and drearier than ever, as if in mourning for its departed guests.

There was a bunch of messages lying on his desk, left by the superintendent for him to transmit. Most of them were for the relay office — instructions to subordinates at eastern points — and these he quickly disposed of; but one, the last, was for the dispatcher, and Belville's hand closed on the key convulsively as he reached the last paragraph of it.

"What's the matter? Go on!" clicked the sounder.

In a jerky, uneven way, unlike its customary smoothness of delivery, his hand spelled out the re-

maining words that caused his agitation: "If your instructions to the operator at this station are to keep the wire grounded, I would suggest that you change them. Changing the operator might do as well."

Belville's hand slipped from the key and his head sank down upon it with a groan. What was there to hope for, except instant dismissal?

"Pretty hard roast, that," said the receiving operator at the dispatcher's office. "How did you happen to do it?"

Belville replied feverishly: "It's true. I did leave the wire grounded, and I have not the least excuse for it."

"Fake one."

"How?"

"Send J. S. R. a message like this: 'Sounder wasn't working; relay was weak; tried ground, thinking wire might be crossed; discovered trouble with battery; was fixing it when special arrived, and neglected to disconnect ground.' Such an excuse ought to fix you O. K."

"It might; but it wouldn't be true."

"Work it out your own way, then. You'll hear from J. S. R. in the morning. Good night." The

final letter was cut off sharply, as if its sender were impatient with him.

Belville wearily replied, "Thanks; G.N." But he did not move from the table. He sat there, quite still, for more than an hour. The torment of self-reproach at the action of which he had been guilty gradually subsided and left him able to think it over calmly.

He was not alarmed for his future; scarce a thought did he bestow on that. He felt that he could care for himself; and, fortunately, none other was dependent on him. But it was his first grave breach of discipline; and though he had little love for Plainfield, it was his first position. He had held it now for over a year, and had hoped for an early promotion. The little office grew suddenly bright; its plaster, darkened by the coal-smoke of years, now, somehow, seemed soft and beautiful; the whole had taken on a new atmosphere that made it homelike and dear to him. It would be hard to leave it, after all — though only a little while before he had thought that he hated the sight of it.

But he was not obliged to leave. He yet might send the message that would clear him with, at most, a mild censure. He started to write it, but his pencil

stuck at the very first word. He wondered what Larue would advise; but he had had enough experience with the ground wire, and he could hardly consult him without using it.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he finally reached a decision. Then he opened his key and called up Larue. "Stay and listen," he said. He called the dispatcher's office, and with a firm, clear touch, sent the message he had formulated:

"J. S. R. The superintendent's charge is true. I have no excuse. It was a plain breach of discipline. As it was my first, however, I hope for the privilege of resigning. May I also request transportation to Denver?"

Close on the heels of the receiver's "O. K." came Larue's inquiry: "What on earth does that mean?"

"It means," replied Belville, "that I am off to Mexico with you."

CHAPTER II

THE OTHER END OF THE GROUND WIRE

In which Belville is twice surprised and teaches his friend a lesson.

BELVILLE'S bedroom was a closet at the rear of his office, from which it was separated by a board partition. When he opened his eyes next morning he lay blinking at the ceiling for several moments before he was able to realise the cause of his dull depression. Then as the memory of the events of the previous night came back to him, he pulled the bed clothes over his head and endeavoured to go to sleep again; but to do that he found to be impossible. Finally he rose, soused his head in a basin of cold water, and glanced at the clock on the office wall, only to learn that it had stopped with the hands marking 4.30. Piece of negligence number two: he had neglected to wind it.

Stepping into his office, he hastily cut in his instruments. Only just in time: Larue, at Red Prairie,

was closing his morning report, and Plainfield's would be called for in a moment.

Fortunately, his report was a light one. The gauge of water in the tank might be read from the office window; there was but a single car on the siding and of that he knew the number.

"Os — os —" called the dispatcher.

"I-i — os — G.M.," replied Belville; the "G.M." meaning "good morning." Then followed his report: "Box 2498, C. B. Q., grain, eastbound. Tank, 9 ft. Weather raw, cloudy. Os."

"G.M.," replied the dispatcher. "Curious; it's clear at RD."

Belville glanced critically through the window and his jaw dropped. The sky was clear as a bell. "Please change that to cool and clear," he said.

"OK. J. S. R. to speak to you."

J. S. R. was the chief dispatcher. He was in for it now, that was evident.

"OS," came over the wire, in the slow, heavy dots of the chief. The chief suffered from telegrapher's paralysis and seldom touched the wire himself. When he did so, the laboured weight of his hand and the leisurely dignity of his expression gave an ominous tone to his sending. This morning it sounded

more threatening than ever: "Will exchange you to another post in a few days; prepare for removal. Letter by No. 3."

Belville's "OK" nearly choked him. So they intended to punish him by reducing him to some more obscure post — some night office, probably, where the principal part of his duty would be to assist in coaling engines. He knew there were two or three such on the line. It changed his regret to rebellion.

Well, it was a good thing in one way: it left him the right to resign. That was better than being discharged.

He waited until there was a break in the reports, then said curtly to the dispatcher's office, "OS, breakfast"; and with the "OK" response, picked up his hat and made his way to the general store, in the rear of which the storekeeper dwelt. The latter's wife provided his meals for a consideration of three dollars per week, half of which Belville suspected was clear profit. He had little appetite for the half-cold chicory and for the salt-pork and potatoes that comprised the breakfast she had "kept for him."

"If folks can't git up in time for meals, they needn't turn up their noses at what they gets," Mrs. Smith remarked, which did not add to Belville's good

nature, but he compelled himself to make a civil reply:

"The breakfast is all right, Mrs. Smith. I am not feeling very well — and I am going to leave you."

"Law me! Why, where be you goin'?"

"To Mexico."

"Mexico — sakes alive! Why, my grandpaw was there in the war. Sich stories as he did tell — Why, they cut off the ears and noses of all the white men that goes there!"

Belville smiled for the first time that morning.

"That was a long time ago," he said; "things are different down there now."

"Ye needn't tell me," replied Mrs. Smith with asperity. "Didn't I have it from my grandpaw, and he an officer? I tell ye, ye'll be e't up by catermounts, an' trant'lers, and sombrerers."

"Sombrero is the Spanish word for 'hat.'"

"Well, p'raps 'twant sombrerors; I guess 'twas ram — rembosers."

Belville smothered an inclination to laugh. "Yes; perhaps the rebosas are dangerous," he said; "they are the head-gear the Mexican women wear, and are said to be very attractive."

Going back to the station, he searched among his belongings till he found an old volume of Prescott's "Mexico." It was a book his father had owned. He had read it through long ago, but he turned the dog-eared pages now with quite a new interest.

"Gold-mines," the conductor had said. Yes; the country was known to be rich in precious metals. Only the other day he had read of a wonderful find, near Chihuahua, that one of the railroad men had made. Might not he prove equally lucky?

Of course the country was far different now from the land that Prescott had written about. Capital was being invested there; railroads were under construction — and salaries for operators were high. Think of Scott getting a hundred! Why, he, with his forty dollars a month, was a much better operator than Scott; and he could go to Mexico with better references; for Scott had been discharged for grossest neglect of duty.

There was the up-freight's whistle. He laid down the book and went out on the platform to watch it draw up to the station. The conductor swung down from a car as it rumbled by. "I've a couple of empties for you," he said; "anything going?"

"Yes; one load."

"All right. There's a friend of yours in the caboose."

"A friend of mine?"

"Yes; from Red Prairie," said the conductor, going into the office to register.

Could it be that Larue was coming? The caboose drew near and the train came to a stop. He watched anxiously for his friend to appear, and felt a presentiment that he was to be disappointed in him. A couple of men descended and sauntered leisurely toward him. Then he breathed more freely. That one must be Larry — that tall, lithe fellow, whose brown eyes were curiously regarding him. Belville stepped forward to greet him, when some one plucked his sleeve from behind. He turned and saw a short, broad-shouldered, freckled young man, with fiery red hair and small, twinkling, blue eyes.

"You're the right sort, I guess," the stranger remarked after giving him one keen glance.

"And you?" asked Belville.

"Why, I'm Larry."

"You — Larry? Well, I'm blessed!"

"Reckon you are that," laughed Larue, taking possession of Belville's hand; "I'd prove a blessing

to any one; for in spite of me hair, that belies me, I'm the most good-natured of all Brian Boru's descendants."

Belville shook hands cordially and endeavoured to conceal his disappointment, but Larue's quick eyes noted it.

"Not quite what you expected, eh?" he said, with a shrug and a grin. "Well, I don't handsome much, Belville, that's a fact. But it's only a sort of disguise, after all; if me face showed the worth of me heart all the girls would die for the love of me!"

Belville laughed in spite of himself. "I confess," he replied, "I had imagined you to be different somehow; but I'm rather glad that I didn't guess right. The conductor said you were on the caboose, so I looked for you from that quarter."

"Oh, I took a run forward to the engine. I'm opposed, on general principles, to staying at the tail of the procession."

"Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"Why didn't you get up before breakfast then? I tried to get you to give you the news before the wire got busy. My relief came by the freight — one of the chaps from the relay — so I jumped aboard her and here I am."

"And I'm more than glad to see you," said Belville. "Come inside and let's get acquainted."

They had little time to do much talking until after the freight train had rumbled away; but after it had departed there were three good hours at their disposal; and the two young men made the most of them. Larue produced Scott's letter; Belville read extracts from Prescott; and in a very short space of time their enthusiasm was at the boiling point.

"I wouldn't remain here," said Belville, "not for the biggest sort of a raise. It seems really laughable now that I should have felt so badly. Why, it was the very best thing that could have happened."

"Ah, yes," said Larue; "blessings often come in disguise, you know. The tormenting thing about 'em is that we don't always recognise 'em."

"No; for we don't always have a good chap like yourself to point them out to us."

"Well, two heads are better than one — as the double-headed boy remarked when signing with the museum for a tremendous salary. But, speaking about birthmarks, I'd be glad if you would tell me something about your own. Who are you, anyhow, Belville?"

"The son of a country clergyman, who thought

to educate me for the law. He was planning to put me through Harvard and was giving me a fair start toward it, when I lost him. I was fourteen then, and his death ended my college ambitions.

"I had an uncle who offered to take me into his store. My wages were to be three dollars a week, with which I was to board, clothe and care for myself. My hours were from seven till nine — fourteen a day. I suppose I was ungrateful. My uncle thought so anyhow when I left him at the end of the first week.

"Meantime, I had made the acquaintance of the depot agent, who was also telegraph operator and baggage master — a big, good-natured, lazy fellow, who wanted an assistant — which the company wouldn't furnish him with. He agreed to teach me gratis, if I would hustle his baggage and freight; and I arranged to work for my board at the grain elevator. The man in charge of the elevator not only made it easy for me, but took me right into his family where I was treated like one of his own boys. His wife was like a mother to me. I never knew my own mother except as a very small child, and my recollections of her are slight. My heaviest work

was keeping the grain pitched back from the trough when loading cars. If you've never tried it, don't believe you know what real work is. It's harder than shovelling coal, and I've tried both — but that's another story. To cut this one short, Larry, I learned telegraphy, got this position, and have held it ever since — which brings me up to date. Now, to quote your own words to you: Who are you, anyhow, Larry?"

"The son of me father likely," said Larry, "but who he was I'll never tell. It's a wise child, you know; and I wasn't, or I never would have been born at all.

"Many's the tale I'll tell you some day of how I scrapped for a living; but we've other things to talk about now, so I'll keep all that for idling dull moments when we're on our way to Mexico.

"To give you just the chapter headings: I was born in a New York tenement — leastwise, so I was told, and I've no reason to doubt it. My mother died shortly after my birth and an organ-grinder, who knew a good thing when he saw it, looked me over and gathered me in, for I was a likely youngster. By that I mean a puny child, white-faced, with-

ered-up; there are many such in the tenements, and they always command a premium for begging with — healthy ones are at a discount.

"I learned to beg before I learned to talk. Thank Heaven, Pietro died before I learned too much. Then for some years I made my way as the proprietor of a moving polishing emporium; from which to selling papers was a natural step. From the papers I learned to spell and read. That gave me the itch to learn something more, so I joined the free night schools. God bless those who established them, for all that I know I owe to them.

"I was always fond of animals, and I used to hang around Madison Square whenever the circus showed. I managed to make myself useful, and I finally got a job with them to help look after the horses.

"On the circus-train, one day out West, I got talking to the train conductor. He offered to get me on braking, and I quit the show on the spot.

"It was when off duty, at the ends of the division, that I learned to pitch lightning. I was always chock full of curiosity, and when I heard the instruments clicking away I wasn't content till I had learned how to understand what was going on.

When I felt myself capable, I haunted the office of the dispatcher till he gave me a place. Red Prairie was my second office. The lucky third, mark what I say, is going to be in Mexico. I'm more than ever sure of it, now that a good chap's going with me."

"No blarney, Larry," laughed Belville. "But now let's constitute ourselves a ways and means committee, to see just what ground we stand on. We can get passes to Denver, no doubt, but from there on —"

"Trust to me for that; I'll guarantee passes to China!"

"That's a trifle beyond our destination. But about cash: I've saved up two hundred dollars. I suppose it's not much compared to your pile, but —"

"But it's enough to buy and sell me three times. I have just seventy bones."

"Then we'll lump the lot and share equally."

"Nonsense! Let me tell you, Belville, if you're that sort you've a lot to learn before you'll be as wise as your uncle. Not to say that I haven't had it. I guess it's a disease every chap has to go through, just like the mumps and the measles. I had it early, but hard enough to last a life-time. It was when I

was with the circus. I'd saved up a hundred dollars. One of the clowns was a young chap — handsome, clever, soft-voiced as a girl. Perhaps that was why he won me. He had one vice — called it a failing — he drank. Got laid off for it at last; and hadn't saved a dollar. Came to me and promised never to touch a drop again, if I'd help him out. I was fool enough to stake him.

"We were showing at one day stands along the Mississippi. At one of 'em he got into trouble — drunk, and resisted an officer. Came back to the tents badly scared at what he'd done; said he'd have to clear out and begged me to loan him a twenty.

"I couldn't help feeling sorry. I went to my locker, dug up my roll and handed him what he had asked for. He said good-bye, with tears in his eyes — not much salt there, I reckon. I went back to my horses, and — well, that was the last of my savings. The fellow sneaked back to my locker, picked the lock, and scooped out every red cent. After that I ate restaurant dinners."

"Well, Larry, have it your own way; but I warn you I am going to combat your cynicism till I've weeded it out."

"Sure, a thing develops with exercise; you'd bet-

ter give it a chance to starve, which it's bound to do in your company."

"I wish I'd a bit of your 'Blarney-stone.' You're Irish all right enough, Larry. But Larue isn't an Irish name, is it?"

"It's the name that the Dago gave me. It means 'the Street' in French, I believe; and suits well enough considering that I'm Irish. But there's number three's whistle. Now for J. S. R.'s letter, and to see what he thinks to do to you."

"It doesn't matter," replied Belville; "my mind is made up; I'm going to Mexico."

"Shake on it, then; and I give you my word, Belville, stick to me, and I'll stick to you just like tar sticks to a feather."

The two boys shook hands heartily, then went out on the platform to meet the incoming train. It was the one westbound passenger train that stopped at this wayside station, and the entire population was present to witness its arrival and catch a breath from the outer world. There was the elevator agent, the most important resident, there were his two helpers, slinking in the background, there was Herr Schmidt, the store-keeper, puffing away at his big Dutch pipe, beerily fat and contented; and there was a distant

view of his thin Missouri-born wife, with her head poked out from her kitchen-window; while a scurrying crowd of little Smiths sailed down the road to the depot.

The train drew in, its conductor placed a letter in Belville's hand, then it rattled off over the prairie, and the little crowd of spectators melted silently away.

Belville reported the train and, that duty performed, with nervous hands opened the dispatcher's letter. As he read it, a puzzled expression stole over his face which quickly changed to one of delight, and he tossed his cap to the ceiling with a joyful hurrah.

"Larry, read that!" he cried.

Larue's face wore an astonished look that deepened as he read. The letter ran:

"Operator OS:

"Dear Sir:

"I owe you an apology. Your breach of discipline was reported by the Superintendent in person, who left his message merely to test you. I should have been satisfied when you sent it in the face of what was very likely a strong temptation to withhold it; but I suggested a plausible excuse which I found you honest enough to reject.

"I have had you in mind for promotion for some

time. I shall send you next week to the Relay. The work will be heavy, but it will be at an advance of $10 per month; and if you prove proficient there I can promise you something better later on.

"Yours truly,

"J. S. RILEY,

"Chf. Dispr."

Belville watched Larue as the latter read the letter. He read it through to the end, then walked to the window without a word.

Belville crossed the room to Larue and laid his hand on his shoulder. Larue wheeled about and faced him with a single word: "Well?"

"You don't blame me for feeling pleased?" queried Belville gently.

"Blame you? No, Belville; a thousand times, No! But you must not blame me either — it's a great disappointment to me."

"Why so?"

"Why? You ask me why? When I counted on you to go with me! When I thought I had found a fellow whom I could stick to like a porous plaster! And it's the first time I've ever found any one halfway worth the finding — and then you ask me why — you — you —"

"Do you think so lightly of a promise?"

"Do I think — why, what do you mean?"

"I gave you my word, didn't I? Well, I always keep my word. And if I feel happy over this letter, it is because it proves that I managed to do the right thing — and it was a great temptation. Yes, I'm very glad. But, Old Fellow, I wouldn't lose you for a dozen promotions. I'm going to Mexico with you; that's all there is about it."

CHAPTER III

THE LEVER

Which lifts our friends out of their homes.

WHEN Belville stated his determination to stand by his promise it had a totally different effect upon Larue from what he anticipated. For a moment Larue regarded him in open-eyed astonishment; then he took him by the shoulders and, shaking him, exclaimed with some asperity: "Belville, don't be a fool!"

Belville smiled, but shook his head.

"Look here now," Larue continued angrily; "your promise can't hold. See here: you are offered a sure advance, a chance that I would have jumped at myself. If you don't take it, it proves you're a fool; and as I've no desire to make a fool my chum, you've simply got to stay here."

Belville was more than amused at this turn to the situation; he was touched by Larue's rough unselfishness and evident sincerity. He already had gained

a sufficient insight into Larue's character to realise the folly of attempting to argue with him; so he merely replied to the outburst by saying: "I'll give it more consideration if you like; give me a chance by taking a run over to the elevator and getting the agent's grain report for me. While you're gone, I'll turn matters over in my mind."

"All right," said Larue good-naturedly; "but remember that I have decided: you are to stick to our friend J. S. R." Saying which, he picked up his hat and went out.

Within half an hour Larue had obtained not only the agent's grain report, but his opinions, moral, political and religious, his life history, and his antecedents; all of which are immaterial to this narrative, save as this goes to show that besides being endowed with a certain amount of Irish wit, Larue also possessed a good share of Irish inquisitiveness, together with sufficient Irish tact to gratify it.

Upon Larue's return to the depot Belville calmly announced: "Well, Larry, it's all settled. J. S. R. has mailed me a letter enclosing passes for us to Denver, together with a remittance covering my salary to date. My relief arrives to-night."

Larry's breath was fairly taken away. He man-

aged to stammer, "Well, I'm — I'm blowed!" Which literally expressed it. Then he assailed Belville with a volley of reproach, argument, protest and entreaty; but finally wound up by clapping him on the back, calling him the truest and best fellow on earth, and vowing that come what might he would stand by him so long as he had legs to stand on, "and then, Bedad, on crutches!"

Belville packed his few belongings; his relief arrived that evening, as promised; and the next morning found them ready to start west on number three, providing the passes came.

There was a larger gathering at the depot than usual, for the folk of the place all liked Belville, and as it was to bid him "Godspeed," even Mrs. Smith condescended to attend. She was dressed in her best for the occasion, and repeatedly announced her opinion that they would both be back inside of six months "without their ears and noses."

The promised letter, with enclosures, was duly received; and as the engine took in water Belville bade his friends good-bye. There was little sign of emotion on the part of any one of them. He might have been leaving them but for a day, and he felt half angry with them, to think he had worked among

them for so long and for so little; and angry with himself also; and he wished that the train would start. Then he felt a sudden tightening of the heart: he had nearly forgotten Elsie. She was Herr Schmidt's daughter, a motherly little girl of twelve years, and the only one in the community in whom Belville had really felt much interest. He looked about for her, but she was not with the other children. He glanced around the corner of the building. There she was, sobbing as if her little heart would break. He lifted her in his arms and kissed her, and for a moment felt tempted to cry himself. Then he put her down hurriedly and pressed a silver dollar into her hand. "To remember me by, little girl," he said, and with another hurried kiss, left her — only just in time, for the train was moving. They were off at last; off for Mexico. But somehow for the next couple of hours Mexico seemed farther away than before and much less attractive. He found it hard to share with Larue in the visions the latter drew of the delights in which they were to revel there, of the novel things that would be theirs to see and hear and learn about, because of a picture that would not be banished, a picture drawn in dull, grey tones, upon a dreary background; and yet a

picture resplendent with light: a child by the depot wall, sobbing.

At Red Prairie Larue picked up his trunk, and all the rest of the day they rolled slowly along over the prairie, that gradually flattened into an endless, level plain with nothing to break its dreary monotony but an occasional crossroads station, whose chief attraction appeared to be numbers of immense sign-boards announcing the fact that they had "Lots for Sale."

The second day was much like the first, the only difference being the change from the plain to a desert, which the scattered clumps of sage-brush and the occasional skulls of dead cattle, gleaming white and forbidding in the dry bunch-grass, served to render more dismal.

Toward evening they began to climb, though the ascent was so very gradual that it was barely noticeable.

By this time they had made the acquaintance of all the trainmen from the conductor to the "Peanut-butcher," and that evening they spent in the cab of the engineer. It was Belville's first ride on a locomotive and he found it novel and exciting. Considering the monotonous gait of the cars, it was surprising to find how the engine pitched and laboured, swaying

wildly from side to side, like an unwieldy boat in a heavy sea, and giving a stranger to its motion the impression that it was positively flying. Then, too, it was interesting to note that the speed, which from the body of the train seemed at all times to be very much the same, in reality changed every little way; now spurting ahead over a good piece of track, now slowing down to pass a sink-hole, or jerkily stopping with brakes fast set and with wild warning blasts of the whistle, when cattle were encountered.

The cattle, too, were a novelty. No sleek, round, mild-eyed barnyard stock, but lean, lank, rawboned creatures. Larue jocosely described them as "one half horns and t'other half tails."

Larue was helping the fireman, so Belville was able to sit alone on the forward part of the left locker, watching them plunging into the West, as if in pursuit of the sunset. And what a gorgeous sunset it was! The western heavens were aflame with crimson bars that melted away to soft yellows and greens, and now and again over all the land and sky came a glorious blush of purple. To Belville's imaginative mind, it seemed freighted with golden promise for the future that was in store for them. He hated to leave it to go back to their cramped

seats in the day-coach; but they reached the end of the division, and a new engine and crew were to take them from there. Besides, it was better for them to turn in early, that they might be awake soon enough to see the daybreak on the mountains.

They climbed down from their elevated seats and stumbled back along the track to their coach, where they settled themselves for the night.

They had just arranged things comfortably when the train stopped at a flag-station; and two men got aboard and took the seat just behind the two boys. The conductor came through to take up the fares, and, when he saw the newcomers, exclaimed, "Hello, Sheriff! What you been up to?"

"Jest a couple o' hoss-thieves," replied the man addressed.

"Get 'em?"

"One."

"Tell me about it."

Belville straightened up in his seat to get a glimpse of the strangers. One was a small, wiry, bald-headed man; the other was young and handsome, but his eyes had a hang-dog expression, and his wrists were heavily handcuffed.

"Wall," said the little man, "'tain't much t' tell.

Run across 'em fust day out. This un tuk to th' sage; 'tother was a half-breed, but game. Knew as how he was wanted. Stuck t' his hoss, an' circled — nothin' but 'n elbow in sight — reg'lar Injun fightin'. We shot same time, but both on us missed. He pumped a couple more, afore I fired my second. Then I chased through th' sage arter this lamb, which I rounded up quite convenient."

"But the half-breed —"

"Oh, he didn't count no more. He was dead," said the Sheriff.

Belville nudged Larry, and whispered, "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," answered Larry, straightening up; "I'd like to know that Sheriff." He deliberately turned and gazed at the two men in the seat behind them; then he smothered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Belville.

"The Clown!"

At these words, the prisoner raised his head and glanced at Larue, and a red flush dyed his forehead.

"'Pears like you — er — know this," remarked the Sheriff, indicating his prisoner by a twitch of his thumb.

"Ye — es — that is," said Larry, "can't say I know any good of him. He robbed me once."

The prisoner shrank back, as if from a blow, then he whined, "I didn't mean to, Larry; 'pon honour, I didn't mean to!"

"Ner ye never meant t' steal a hoss!" The Sheriff sneered.

"Let him talk a bit," pleaded Larry; and the Sheriff good naturedly consented. But Belville curled down and went to sleep, and heard no more of the conversation.

Their first view of the mountains marked an epoch in their lives; though Larry remarked, characteristically, "'Tain't so much what they may look like as what they may pan out for us that is most interesting."

Denver was their first disappointment. They had imagined a mining town of the sort that Mark Twain and Bret Harte had pictured: cowboys galloping through the streets, Indians decked with feathers, tents of campers, gambling dens — all the picturesque paraphernalia with which those two favourite authors juggled so delightfully. Instead, they found a quiet, orderly city. Larue remarked with some disgust: "Were it not for its back-

ground of mountains, Denver might just as well have been located in the middle of Illinois, so far as I can see."

And the mountains, to which they had looked forward so eagerly, were an added source of disappointment. Instead of being at their base, as they had thought the city would be, they found that it was fifteen miles or more even to the first foot-hills; and the real mountains, they were told, lay further back beyond their line of vision.

At the depot they picked acquaintance with one of the operators, a young fellow named Crow, who volunteered to pilot them about, and with whom they discussed the important question of to whom they should apply with the best chance of success for free transportation to El Paso, which was the junction point on the Texas boundary with the Mexican Central Railway.

They had in mind a rather unusual route by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad to Conejos, and from there down a branch to Castillo. From the latter, by staging twenty miles or so, they could reach the old town of Santa Fé, a place that Belville had greatly desired to visit. But they were treated to but scant courtesy by the D. & R. G. officials, who,

of late, had been besieged for passes by a horde of migrating railroad men. In the "A. T. & S. F." offices they were received somewhat more kindly; and the dispatcher, who was attracted by their bright, boyish faces, though he said he could not provide them with passes, offered them positions. These they politely but firmly declined, for their hearts were set upon Mexico; so, thanking him, they went back to consult their new acquaintance, Crow.

Belville was for purchasing tickets, but this Larue positively negatived, and the result proved his wisdom. When Crow learned of their dilemma he expressed great indignation. "I'll fix that, fellows," he said; "come with me."

They followed Crow through the station and up a flight of stairs to the trainmen's room, which they found to be comfortably filled with men in blue uniforms and uncomfortably filled with tobacco smoke. The occupants paused in their pursuits to stare at the intruders, with the exception of a knot of men who were gathered about one of the tables absorbed in a game of whist. To one of these men young Crow led the way, and stood beside him without a word, waiting for the "hand" to be finished.

Then he introduced Larue to one of the players,

a Conductor Murphy, and added: "He wants to get down to Conejos with you; and from there he and his friend here are bound for the Mexican Central. The Old Man's refused them transportation, and —"

"Say no more, Sonny," said Murphy. "I take out number six to-night, and I reckon your friends go through with me."

CHAPTER IV

THE POINT

Being the peg on which hangs a story.

IN accord with his promise, the boys took passage on Conductor Murphy's train that night, and curling themselves up in their seats were soon in the Land of Nod.

About midnight Murphy wakened them. "It's a beautiful night," he said, "and we're coming into Colorado City, where the smelters are going full blast. It's a sight worth seeing; and Pike's Peak, in the moonlight, is something grand."

So, truly, the boys found it. Below lay the fire-laden town, its tall chimneys belching their red flames into the night and spreading a mantle of smoke over all, shutting out from the town the moonlight and shrouding the whole in a darkness that the pillars of fire from the furnaces pierced like flaming swords and in the light of which the buildings stood out in bold relief, sombre silhouettes upon a flaming back-

ground. Towering above, as the city was left behind them, the boys could see the glistening snow-covered mountain, like some great jewel piercing the moonlit sky.

When they awoke the next morning the train was traversing the summit of the pass, which appeared barren and forbidding, covered as it was with a heavy mantle of snow. It conveyed an idea of immensity, perhaps, but could lay slight claim to grandeur.

As the train drew into Conejos, Murphy called them into the baggage-car and gave them a card to the conductor of the train on the branch road. "It's as good as a bona-fide pass," he said, "and will carry you through to Mexico, as sure as my name's Murphy. A tie-pass would beat it to Castillo, though, if all they say of the branch line is true."

"How so?" asked Larue.

"Why, they say that not long ago the branch line had a passenger. On the way down the road, over the loops, the train scared up a jack-rabbit. The passenger, just to while away the time, jumped off the train and started in pursuit. He chased the jack down the mountain and finally overtook it and killed it with his six-shooter; then he sat down by the

track for the train to catch up. If he hadn't killed that rabbit it might have been the last of him."

"What had that to do with it?"

"It took the train so long to catch up he might have died *from starvation!*"

They had three hours to wait at Conejos before the branch-line train would start. To pass the time they walked out a mile or so to the old Mission, a building erected some hundreds of years ago by the early Spanish missionaries. It interested our travellers not only because of its antiquity, but for the reason that it was the first adobe structure either of them had ever beheld. When they reached it they found the portals closed and the windows barred with wooden shutters. Belville was for returning; but Larue's curiosity prevailed and he gave a resounding blow to the entrance. The echo of it had scarcely died away ere a small panel was slipped aside from within it and the opening disclosed framed a brown girlish face that might have served as a model for one of Raphael's Madonnas. The girl's dark eyes gazed expectantly at them, and Larue requested permission to inspect the interior of the mission. The eyes and lips smiled back at him,

and a low, musical voice replied: "No comprendo, Señores!"

"I'm Dago enough to understand that," said Larue in an aside to Belville. "It's as much as to say she doesn't — but I reckon here's a language she will understand!" with which he held out to her a silver coin, and added the one Spanish word he knew: "Sabe?"

The girl laughed merrily, but merely shook her pretty head and disappeared from the aperture. In a moment another head appeared at it, that of a venerable priest, who, in stilted English, rusty from disuse, gravely inquired their wishes. Upon making them known, the young men found themselves graciously received. The priest bade them enter and be at home, with true Spanish hospitality placing before them cakes and wine; and when they had refreshed themselves, he showed them through the mission with polite, if laboured, explanations.

The building, save for its novelty, was not of particular interest. Its four white-washed walls, one story high, enclosed a square, brick-paved patio, or court, that was bordered on all sides by deep verandas, after the manner of most Spanish country-houses. The chapel, which occupied one corner of

the structure, was merely a dark, empty room, devoid of all furnishings except the gilt-laden altar, before which a small red lamp was burning dimly.

Belville was curious to ascertain who were the other occupants of the Mission, but none of them was in evidence. He had hoped to see more of the brown-faced girl with the big, expressive eyes, but save for themselves and the aged priest, the Mission seemed deserted. At length he hazarded a question: "Are there no others with you, Father José?"

The priest shook his head sadly. "None but the muchachita," he said. "She attends to my simple wants. For the rest —" he shrugged his shoulders, —"what have they now for an old priest? What have they for religion?"

"How long have you been alone like this?"

"Since the gold in the hills. The Americanos they come pell-mell, and away rush all my people."

"And — the muchachita?"

"Ah!" A wan smile flickered about the old man's lips. "The muchachita — she is of my blood; she loves me."

"She is darker than you."

"That is of the Indian."

"But she is not of the Pueblos?"

"Her father was a son of my brother and my brother's wife was a Pueblo."

"And the muchachita's mother? Will you not tell me something of her?"

"The air is chill, for an old man. Yet I am not so old in years. Come; let us sit by the charcoal.

"So! You would like that I tell you of Chita's mother? Well — yes. I will tell, if it please you.

"You know of the Apaches? They are not of my people here. My people are the Pueblos; my people have souls. Not so, the Apaches. The Apaches, they are — what you call? — wolves. They have but one life to live; and to kill — to kill; that is their religion.

"So! It was many years ago — when the Americanos first came in carros grandes with white tops, with cattle, with wives, and with mothers and niños. Very many would come at one time — more safety so.

"It came a big caravana. There was much to tempt, and the wolves — Apaches — they needed not much to tempt them. The Apaches were much feared of the plains — not so much of the mountains. The plains and the first of the mountains the big car-

avana had passed. They were quite by the Indian country, save for my people, the Pueblos; and they were rejoicing that it was so. Perhaps, for that, they were careless.

"So. It was in the western pass. The men were walking. Some of the women, also.

"There was one woman who rode a black horse. She was young and strong. She rode like a caballero. The hills were on both sides of them. It was here the Apaches trapped them, and it was surprise and perfect. Most were soon killed. Not all. Some were of other fortune. Of such was she who rode the black horse. She thought to fly, but an Apache shot, and her horse dropped dead beneath her. The Apache would have killed her then, for she fought like a man — he could not take her — she was afraid of nothing — but a man there was who shot down the Apache who would have killed her with his knife; who caught her up before him on his horse and carried her away, in spite of Apache bullets. This man was the son of my brother. He it was saved this woman and carried her straight here to the mission. It was God's will that she should live — should live to become his wife and the mother of my Chita. She died here — in the pain of the life

that was Chita's. The father had gone; he did not know. He knows only the death of the mother. Chita will always be the mission's child."

"The father had gone, you say? Gone where?"

"Far away. Enough, señores. If you would take the train to-day — pardon — it is time that you should go."

Padre José rose stiffly, and Belville, somewhat rebuffed, quickly followed his example.

The Padre showed them to the portal and bade them Godspeed. It was as if he surmised their desire to have another glimpse of Chita; for as they passed a half-opened door, he uttered some words in Spanish and the door was quickly shut from within.

When the portals had closed behind them, they walked a little way in silence. At the rise of the hill, Belville turned for a last glance at the mission. As he did so, one of the shutters opened and a bare arm was waved to them. It was a farewell from Chita.

They were nearing the station before either spoke. Larue broke the silence. "Bell," he said, "I've been thinking."

"So have I. Poor little Chita!"

"I've been thinking of the priest, and of what he related. The description he gave of the caravan,

the fight, the girl with the black horse — wasn't it vividly told? I felt almost like an eye-witness. Do you suppose he could have been one?"

"The Spanish are always dramatic."

"I'd give something to know the truth about Chita's father."

"Perhaps," replied Belville, "perhaps we may — some day. Who knows?"

"There are no more miracles," said Larue; but he afterwards recalled Belville's remark, which, in the light of after events, seemed almost prophetic.

CHAPTER V

THE MAGNET

In which our adventurers undertake a speculation, and Larue makes himself respected.

THAT afternoon on the way down the mountain they found some justification for the yarn Conductor Murphy had told them. The road wound down the mountain in a succession of long loops, and merely that they might say that they had done it, the two young men leaped from the steps of the slowly moving car, ran half a mile down the mountainside, and found time to pluck a bunch of wild-flowers before the train caught up with them.

It was after dark when they reached Castillo, a small, dirty, Spanish-Indian settlement at the end of the narrow-gauge railway; and as the stage took them away from it at the first peep of dawn next morning, they were not sorry to have seen so little of it.

The coach was a lumbering relic of the time that was fast passing away before the steady advance of

the less romantic but far more practical railroads. It laboured along on its clumsy wheels, its body swaying from side to side on the stout leathern slings, and the six mules that drew it took their own course and timed their gait to suit themselves across the barren valley — so, at least, it seemed to the passengers, who would have said that the driver slept had it not been for his periodical expectorations.

They had for companions a Mexican, his head and shoulders swathed in his striped serape, with naught showing but his black eyes and the smoke from his cigarette, and also a grizzly-bearded miner, whose cowhide boots were painted thickly with yellow clay that had dried to them.

Since crossing the pass the weather had been mild; but it had turned colder in the night, and the morning air was frosty. It was too chilly to risk going to sleep, and all were too sleepy and uncomfortable to start a conversation; but as the sun rose above the hills Larue broke the silence by whistling a tune and, somewhat to his surprise, the miner joined in its chorus. When it was ended, the latter leaned forward and touched Larue on the shoulder.

"That thar brings back old times," he said; "do it ag'in, won't you?"

Larue complied good naturedly, the miner marking time by nodding his head approvingly.

"That's good!" he exclaimed at its conclusion. "I ain't heered that tune since I was a lad. Reckon ye got it way back East — not that I'm after pryin'."

"Oh," said Larry, "if you'd care to know something about us, don't hesitate to ask."

"I'd be glad to know," said his new acquaintance; "I feared to give offence. It's a sort o' rule in these diggin's not to ask too many questions —'cept, p'raps, at th' muzzle of a gun."

Larue gratified the miner's curiosity; but remembering the latter's words, refrained from seeking a like confidence until such time as it might be volunteered.

"Then I reckon," said the miner, whose name was "Tomson; jest plain Tomson, no handle," and who thereby expressed the prevailing contempt for conventional nomenclatures, "Then I reckon ye don't know much 'bout gold."

Larue admitted their ignorance.

"Then it's sart'inly something ye'll hev to l'arn. Ye don't mind me givin' ye a lesson? No? Then cast yer eyes over that!" While speaking, his hand had been delving in the depths of his capacious pock-

ets, and as he concluded he proudly drew forth and exhibited to Larue what appeared to be but a bit of rusty-coloured stone, but which, as Tomson informed him in an impressive whisper, was " the stuff, wuth a thousand a ton ! "

It was all Greek to Larue, who did not hesitate to display his ignorance by requesting further information. Tomson promptly enlightened him by plunging at once into a lecture on gold, its discovery, its mining, the men who had made fabulous fortunes by it, and the wonderful wealth of that but partially explored region adjacent to Santa Fé, the foothills of the Sangre de Christo Mountains; wherein, he informed them, by way of peroration, " Tomson's Gem " was located and from which had come the identical bit of gold-bearing quartz that he exhibited.

The richness of Tomson's vernacular was sufficient in itself, but when it set before them such magnetic matter, who could blame our two young friends for betraying deep interest? Noting the impression that he had made, Tomson proceeded to expatiate, with the result that before Santa Fé was sighted a verbal agreement was reached, whereby Larue and Belville, in consideration of equal shares in " Tomson's Gem Location," were to " grub-stake " its original discov-

erer and to assist him in sinking a shaft thereon, with the full expectation of reaping therefrom their everlasting fortune.

Under the colour of this glowing hope the stage-coach brought them to the top of the divide and Santa Fé lay before them: a handful of glistening white pebbles crowded into a setting of yellow and brown, with here and there a larger one denoting some public building and in the centre a patch of vivid green marking the public square.

Then for the first time the driver wakened from his dreamy contemplation. Gathering the reins in his left hand, with his right he wielded his long mule-whip, waking the echoes with its crackings and playing it like a great hissing snake about the leaders' withers, and the six startled mules tossed their shaved tails, cocked their ears, and set off at such mad pace as threatened to wreck the coach, which swayed alarmingly from side to side as it plunged in wild pursuit of the frightened animals down the steep and winding mountain road.

The boys clung desperately to their seats, only catching an occasional phrase of Tomson's continued harangue: "Jest an aisy three hour tramp — the hotel whar ye'll stop — them peaks beyant's the

Cristys — many's the day I've prospected — little but wind fer fodder —"

As they neared the town the coach slowed up, that the mules might regain their wind to make a properly imposing entrance, and for a mile or more they progressed at a snail's pace. Then, as the outskirts of the city were reached, the driver gathered the reins again and swung his long whip and yelled. The mules dashed off madly at the sting of the lash and the first impression our travellers gained of Santa Fé was a cloud of yellow dust through which they caught shadowy glimpses of wildly fleeing children, chickens and dogs, while their ears were deafened with the clatter and din produced by the jingling harness, the creaking coach, and the babel of screams, howls and barks, crowned by the Comanche-like shouts of the driver, until, with a jerk and a jolt, the stage-coach stopped before the principal hotel, the Jehu tossed his reins to a groom and leisurely descended, and the journey by stage was over.

The hotel proved clean and inviting, but the meals were served "à la Espagñol," and the dinner hour was not until five o'clock. As it was now past one, the travellers partook of bread, cheese, and coffee.

The cheese was of a sort the boys had never tasted before, though they afterwards found it to be a variety common throughout Spanish America. It was merely the curds of milk, soured in a pig-skin and hung in the sun to evaporate and harden; a wholesome article and palatable food, and one which, partaken of heartily with bread and coffee, comprised the "almuerza," the first meal of the day throughout Mexico.

When the keen edge of their appetites had been taken off, Belville expressed a desire to see the town; and Tomson, unwilling to trust these tenderfeet alone for fear they might fall into other hands than his, volunteered to act as their guide.

They sauntered across the public square, that was sadly in need of a gardener, and down one of the narrow streets between adobe buildings that were all alike in their rusty whitewash with blue trimmings, brown tile roofs, and general filth. The way they had chosen led through the "Greaser" quarter, a district populated by Mexicans, half-breeds and Indians. Here and there were small stuffy shops smelling vilely of garlic, bunches of which and braids of red and green peppers, gourds, dried meats, and vegetables, hung from the ceilings and about the

doors, where they were " cured " by the smoke from the strong cigarettes of the occupants. Half-naked children thronged the way, or played upon the cobbles of the pavement, gazing with wide open eyes and mouths at the strange invaders of their domain; while a crowd of beggars, clad in rags that had lost all similitude of garments and which were of one colour with their dirty brown skins, relentlessly pursued them.

They made a circuit through this part of the town to reach the Santa Fé Mission, one of the oldest structures on American soil, if not the very oldest. They were told that the records proved the original building to have been erected in A. D. 1537, but that the first structure was destroyed by the Indians. In A. D. 1555 the mission was rebuilt; and the present church, though having suffered repairs to such an extent that it greatly resembled that historic musket which retained nothing of its original but the touch-hole, still preserved the architectural form of the original and possessed within its interior the original altar and balcony that dated back to 1537. The altar and balcony are of arborvitæ, elaborately and beautifully carved by hand and proof against time and the elements. Not a single piece of iron enters

into the construction of any part of the building, the framework and all being held together with pins of arborvitæ. Many desperate scenes no doubt those ancient walls have witnessed, scenes of riot and rebellion, of bloodshed and of massacre; for the Pueblos and Navajos, the native tribes, were not so passive in slavery as their more intellectual and less savage brethren, the Aztecs; and when the iron rule of the Spanish priests became too heavy a burden they were apt to break from the bonds of superstition and then were hazardous times for their self-appointed masters.

From the chapel to the convent was but a few steps; but as it was not the hour for visitors, they were not permitted to inspect more than the convent's outer walls. It was a comfortable looking, newly white-washed, two-story adobe, scrupulously clean, as were the grounds about it, and therefore in striking contrast with its surroundings.

The exposition building marked the end of their afternoon ramble. It contained little of interest beyond its mining exhibit, the inspection of which, with Tomson's profuse comments, made the boys more than ever eager to visit " Tomson's Gem."

At peep of day next morning, therefore, they were

ready to start on their tramp to the prospect, loaded with shovels, hand-steels, sledges, picks, powder and fuse, and the provisions for the outing. It was an easy three hours' jaunt, Tomson assured them; but while it might have been so for the seasoned legs of the old prospector, it proved a tiresome four hours' tramp for the two sanguine but soft-muscled tenderfeet. When they finally arrived at the location they were too tired to do more than to sit on the edge of its six-foot hole and watch Tomson work at its bottom.

At evening, after making a cache of their outfit, they tramped wearily back to their hotel. Their walk returning furnishing the one adventure of the day.

Tomson, like the majority of his kind, carried in a belt-holster a large calibre revolver. Larue, who knew but little about firearms of any kind, had brought with him from the East a cheap, nickel-plated, pocket pistol of the "Bulldog" variety. This he had exhibited with some pride to Tomson, only to be told, "My boy, ef ye ever shot me with that leetle toy, *an' I fund it out,* dang me but I'd give ye a fust-class lickin'!"

On their way back to town Larue's bright eyes

spied a silently moving mass of grey disappearing into an arroya. "Look! Look!" he cried; "is that an antelope?"

The three set off in hot pursuit, despite their fatigue, and reaching the bank of the gulch, beheld in its depths, seated upon a flat stone with its great ears laid back upon its shoulders, a meek, mild-eyed, jack-rabbit. Tomson and Larue both had their guns ready, but Tomson was the first to fire; and the jack started off down the gulch at a pace that left no time for reflection.

"Missed, by thunder!" growled Tomson, as Larue pulled the trigger of his "Bulldog." The jack gave a tremendous bound, turning a sommersault in the air and coming down all of a heap. Larue, with a shout, plunged down the steep bank to the quivering mass of grey fur and climbed back with it triumphantly. Tomson watched him in silence. Silently, too, he took possession of the game and slung it over his shoulder, and in silence he walked for nearly a mile. Then he turned to Larue, deliberately extending his hand with two simple but expressive words: "Shake, Pard!"

"Sure," promptly answered Larue, though somewhat nonplussed.

"I takes it back," said Tomson.

"What?"

"What I says to ye this mornin' about yer gun. Any man what kin stop a jack, an' him a streakin' it as that un uz doin', hain't no slouch fer any kentry — an' I reckon as how ef he does it with a syringe like yourn it's all th' more power to him!"

Larue bore these new honours graciously and they continued their journey.

"Larry," said Belville, as they were crawling under the blankets after a hearty supper, "how did you become such an expert shot?"

Larry stuck his tongue in his left cheek and winked his left eye. "To tell the truth, Belville, me boy," he said, "'twas jest part of me Irish inheritance. 'Twas the first shot I ever fired with a living mark for a target. 'Twas just the natural fool luck an Irishman's always born to."

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTERY

Which exposes our friends to buck-fever.

THE trip to the mining claim and return was repeated every day for two weeks, when Larue began to long for a change. His was a volatile nature and he was never contented long in any one place, which was partly due perhaps to the roving life he had been forced to lead. Belville, too, began to weary of it. The daily walk of three hours each way had lost its novelty, though their muscles were hardening under the constant exercise and they were none the worse for it. But it was wearisome to wield the sledge or hold the drill for Tomson and after each blast to muck out the shattered rock, always with the same eager hope, yet always to meet with nothing but the same unending brown-stained quartz. It may have looked promising enough to the trained eye of the old prospector, but it never showed any visible free gold to repay his partners' hopes.

"It's wuth doin' a leetle deeper, boys," Tomson would say after each mucking out. "This yere quartz hain't no old-maid sort. Ef ye're gettin' tired, what say to gittin' a couple o' rifles an' takin' a day off for venison?"

So one fine morning the three set out early, prepared to make a day of it, or two, if necessary, for they carried both blankets and a small supply of provisions. The air was just cool enough to feel bracing, and there was snow in the foothills, where Tomson assured them they were sure to find deer. They walked to the "Gem" before breakfasting, and before noon had gotten well into the hills.

About one o'clock they ran across the first deer sign, and here Tomson suggested that they should separate, each taking a "comb" to follow.

They pursued their way thus for an hour, when Larue startled Belville by a great shout: "Look, Belville! Look! Gee, ain't that pretty! One — two — three — five! Five of 'em!"

"Five what?" called Belville.

"Deer, of course! There goes the tail of the last one!"

"Why don't you shoot?"

"What? Great snakes! I clean forgot I had a rifle!"

They gathered together and followed the trail for an hour, but it led into thick juniper and spruce, where, though they started the deer again, they failed to catch even a glimpse of them. Larue bewailed his stupidity, but it would not bring back the chance he had missed.

The skies are usually of the clearest and the air most bracing in the Sangre de Cristos, and a tramp of twenty to thirty miles will waken a keen appetite even in the greatest dyspeptic. All of them were blessed with good digestions; and when they had searched the thicket in vain, Tomson called a halt for a meal. While he unpacked the provisions, Larry started a camp-fire.

Belville, with his rifle slung on his back, walked to the edge of a deep ravine that broke through the hillside a furlong away and through which a mountain brook was tumbling, with at one point a clear fall of nearly a hundred feet. The roar of the falling water and the charm of the spot so attracted him that he seated himself on the margin of the precipitous bank and fell to building "Castles in Spain." Would the "Gem" prove a fortune? He was not

too old for college; he might yet realise his father's ambitions for him.

He gazed at the churning waters below him and with his gaze followed them up to the cascade. Something beside the deep pool at its foot attracted his attention. Two big black eyes seemed to materialise beneath the focus of his own vision, and he gazed at them in fascination. As he continued to do so, the eyes and the object seemed to expand, dwarfing all else in the surrounding scene, and he felt a tingling sensation as of an electric discharge passing through him with rapid vibrations that rendered his muscles powerless. He knew that his rifle, with a move of his arm, might be brought into position; yet he felt that he could not make that move or any other until the object should make one. For a full minute, that seemed an hour to the inexperienced huntsman, he and his quarry rigidly maintained their statuesque positions. Then slowly the numbness passed away, the glowing eyes resumed their proper proportions. Warily, fearfully, making no sound, Belville's hand grasped his rifle, and slowly, very slowly, brought it into position. Still not a move from the object. Belville's heart sank. Surely if it were alive it would make some movement. It must be an optical

delusion. He did but make a common mistake. A rotting stump, or a water-carved rock was probably all it would prove to be. He lowered his rifle. There was the nervous shock again; for the deer had made a quick, startled movement. Again Belville's muscles were powerless. Calling himself a bigger fool than Larue, he shut and opened his eyes half a dozen times rapidly. Then, though his heart so beat that he could feel its pulsations from head to foot in every throbbing artery, by a supreme effort he steeled himself to aim carefully, and convulsively pulled the trigger.

There was a sound Belville never forgot: a sobbing sound, half human. The animal bounded into the air, crashed down on a fallen tree-trunk, and lay across it in the agony of its death-blow.

Uttering a cry, Belville threw down his rifle and leaped and rolled down the precipitous bank, tearing his clothing and scratching his hands and face on shrubs and vines, though without knowing it, for he felt no pain — he was mad with victory. All his exultation vanished, however, when he stood beside the dying deer. It was a young buck, bearing its first horns. As he came up to it, it raised its head and looked at him and Belville would have given any-

thing he possessed to have undone his cruel deed. Tears formed in its great eyes and it struggled to crawl toward him. It was with a heart overflowing with regret that he drew his hunting-knife and plunged it deep in the glossy neck. Then the youth drew back hastily, as the red blood spurted. The deer's muscles twitched, the reproachful eyes glazed, and its sufferings were over.

Tomson and Larue had heard the shot and came to him with shouts of congratulation: "The first deer, Bell! My, but I'm glad *you* got it! Hope you get a thousand more!"

Belville looked up from where he was kneeling beside the dead buck. "Yes, Larry," he said; "it's my first deer — and it's my last one. I shall never harm another!"

CHAPTER VII

THE SWITCHBOARD

Which switches our friends back on the old trail, and wherein they find themselves buncoed.

THE boys laboured faithfully for two weeks more, without apparent result. They became toughened to the work, and by adding their labour to Tomson's the hole had become a slope, in mining parlance; that is to say, they had tunnelled in to a depth of nearly thirty feet, following the dip of the vein, at an incline of about forty degrees. But the character of the vein matter showed no material change. It was still the same dirty iron-stained quartz and, so far as the boys could see, showed no promise of anything better. They grew tired of searching the muck after the blasts for a match to Tomson's specimen. The latter showed visible threads of gold. Tomson had minutely described the manner of its finding; had pointed out the identical spot in the vein from whence it had come; but the boys began to doubt his having found it at all, at least on the Gem location.

There finally came a particularly disappointing day; and that evening Larue remarked to Belville: "This Gem's no diamond — though it's cut us out of the price of one. I think it's time we cut it!"

Belville got out the contract they had drawn and signed with Tomson. Reading it again, for the twentieth time, they seriously discussed ending the matter. It really seemed they had no other choice. Their joint finances were reaching a pass where something or other would have to be done to strengthen their failing condition. Out of the three hundred odd dollars they had started with, there now remained less than two hundred. There was their board and Tomson's to pay for the current week; also a bill for powder. When these were paid they would have less than a hundred and fifty remaining.

Having decided how best to proceed, they called Tomson in and broke the news to him — in as kindly a manner as possible, for in their close companionship they had grown to like and admire the old Argonaut. They had anticipated a considerable outburst. To their surprise, Tomson calmly rose and shook hands with them, remarking philosophically: "I'm sorry ye're done, boys; but I've bin square with ye, haven't I?"

They assured him they had no doubt of that whatever.

"Wall, then," Tomson continued; "I'm proud to say as how ye've bin square with me. Square dealin' airns fair dealin'. Afore ye hand back that thar contrack I want t' say ag'in what I've allus said: The 'Gem' hain't showed much gold yet to mention, but, as I've allus assured ye, I opines the conditions fav'rable. I feels it my dooty ter say ter ye, better stick t' yer contrack awhile longer; for th' 'Gem' air a promisin' prospeck."

"If it's promising," asked Larry, with a shade of asperity, "when do you think it promises to pay?"

"Mebbe ter-morrer," said Tomson, hopefully; "mebbe not till nex' week, or nex' month, or nex' year. Jest th' same, I tell yer th' 'Gem' air a promisin' prospeck."

"We can't pay board with promises," said Belville.

Tomson's eyes twinkled good-naturedly, Belville thought, as he handed Tomson the contract and watched the old man destroy it.

"Don't fergit what I says," said Tomson, when the contract lay in bits on the floor: "Howso the 'Gem' hain't showed much gold, it air shorely a

promisin' prospeck. If so be I makes a strike, hope ye won't hev no hard feelin's."

"Certainly not," said Belville. "We would be very happy instead to learn of your good fortune."

They shook hands again and parted. "Queer," mused Larue, "he never swore once!"

"Did you notice his eyes?" asked Belville.

"How?"

"The look in them made me think he was keeping something back. He didn't seem loth to be rid of us."

"But he insisted, you recollect, that 'The Gem air a promising prospeck.'"

"That's nothing but a favourite phrase of his. It has grown to be without meaning."

"Well, we've tried our first mining venture and failed. Put it down to profit and loss. We've profited by the experience."

"And the next time may prove more fortunate."

"That's right; spilt milk; burnt fingers; sour grapes. Let's get our traps together and move on the enemy's country."

Toward evening of the following day they rode out of Santa Fé in the caboose of a freight train, whose conductor they had met the night before and

who had promised to frank them through to Mexico's frontier by means of his acquaintances down the line.

In the caboose were two cattle-men, brawny six-footers in flannel shirts, broad felt hats and riding boots, typical specimens of their class; yet, as their conversation proved them, men of education. They were talking with the conductor.

"Yes," remarked one of them, "I'm glad that I came West. I've made a snug pile out of cattle; but I believe that what I have made will prove but a drop in the bucket to what I shall make out of mining."

"Been investing?" queried the conductor.

"Only ten thousand. But I'd have given twice that, had it been necessary, to acquire the property I purchased to-day. Here is a specimen from it." He took from his pocket a piece of iron-stained quartz that looked strangely familiar to the boys; then, falling into the vernacular, he concluded with the startling statement: "That's the stuff, and a thousand a ton, sir! I reckon it won't be many moons before you will hear something warm about Tomson's Gem Location!"

The boys looked at each other, power of speech

failing. Belville's face grew ashy pale and the pupils of his eyes contracted, exhibiting a phase of his character to which Larue had been a stranger. He finally ventured, somewhat nervously: "Bell — I say, Belville!"

"What?" It was scarcely a whisper.

"Buncoed, by all that's glorious!"

"Buncoed; yes; by a scoundrel. We may meet that man again some day; and then —"

"Then, what?"

The angry expression faded from Belville's face, making way for a curious blending of indignation and humour, as he continued, "and then I may get even with him."

"How?"

"I'll tell you that when the time comes."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SOUNDER

Which sounds all sorts of men.

IT was a perfect summer's day, or so it seemed to our Northerners, when they first saw the Mexican border and descended from the train at El Paso. El Paso was then merely a border town. It has grown to be one of the most important cities in Texas; but conditions across the line from it in Mexico still remain practically the same as they were at the time of the boys' visit, save only that life to-day for Americans in Mexico has grown to be even more strenuous.

From the depot platform the two young men gazed across the far-famed Rio Grande, straining their imaginations to picture what fortune for them might lie beyond. It was the dryest season of the year and the Rio Grande seemed little more than a moist ditch; but afar to the southwest rose the mountains, scallops of purple against the blue sky; to the southeast was a mass of green foliage, orchards of

peaches, apricots and figs; while just across the river, to the south, the picturesque city of Paso del Norte (now called Juarez) basked in the brilliant sunlight, its old cathedral standing out in bold relief, like some watchful sentinel guarding its slumbering comrades.

This was the gateway that would lead them to the Mecca of their travel. Across that sluggish river lay the realisation of their hopes. It would be like a new birth to them: a new tongue to learn, new friends to make, new customs to acquire, new habits to form, new pleasures to enjoy, new temptations to resist — a totally new atmosphere in which to live and breathe and work.

Leaving their luggage at the depot, they walked up town in search of their dinners. Between the station and the cluster of heterogeneous constructions that marked the site of the future city lay a long stretch of yellow sand-dunes, with a few starved cacti accentuating the desolation. Beyond these, on either side of the narrow street, was a row of one story frame shacks and canvas tents, in which all sorts of merchandise were exposed for sale. At the end of this one principal street stood the most imposing structure of the place. It was not new, and had

probably been the hacienda building when the site of El Paso was merely a tiny portion of some great cattle ranch. It now bore across its whitewashed adobe face the word "Hotel."

The boys were served with an excellent meal, the cooking being Spanish throughout. After satisfying their hunger they paid their bill and sauntered back toward the railway station. There was but one brick building — a trifling earnest of what was to come. Its door stood invitingly open and as they glanced within a young man came out, surveyed them with cool effrontery for a moment, then inquired of them, "Railroaders?"

"Yep," said Larue.

"Bound south?"

Larue nodded.

"Been there myself. Don't go."

"Why not?" inquired Belville.

"Dog's life — poor pay — Mexican slugs — worse grub — cactus, sage — tough crowd — cowboys, greasers, peons — nothing but dirt and vermin!"

"Where were you located?" Larry asked.

"Jimulco."

"Why, that was where Scott was," said Belville.

"Yep, I'm Scott," said the stranger.

They made themselves known and shook hands all around; after which Scott continued, in his jerky way: "Drink? Nop? Show you the town then? All right — come on — won't take long to see it. This is the leader — Fashion Saloon — take a look at it first, as we're here."

Scott ushered them in and they glanced about them. The room was gaudily draped with flags and bunting, soiled relics of its "Opening celebration," which event was recent history. It contained a heterogeneous crowd of miners, cowboys and railroad men. Some were playing at billiards and pool; others were looking on critically; but more than half the occupants were massed at the extremity where, as Larue ascertained by elbowing in, faro, hazard, roulette, poker, and other absorbing games of chance were running "wide open."

"Everything goes here," said Scott to Belville. "Place is quiet, though — allows no nonsense. See that little chap over there? Operator from Houston. Last week, cowboy in from Tucson — thought he'd make the running. Bluffed everyone — bullied the caboodle. Little chap playing pool — drew back his cue — butted Bully's bread-box.

Bully picked up little chap — slammed him down — walked on him. Little chap crawled away — borrowed a gun — came back — started playing. 'Long came Bully — full — reached for his gun — little chap had his handy — emptied it quick as skat — acted like a man, though — paid for Bully's funeral.

"See that quiet man over there — dudish looking fellow? Name's Smith — Six-shooter Smith — keeps a private graveyard. Never carries a gun in sight — carries 'em in coat-pockets — shoots right through the cloth — buys a new coat every Sunday. Quiet fellow, Smith. Not much to say. Takes his out in action. Runs this town square, he does. He's U. S. Marshal.

"Nice fellow, Smith — only one fault — might call it a failin' — can't bear to ask a man to drink and have the chap refuse — sort of a mania, I reckon — why, he's killed — scuse me — man over there I must see — back in a jif —" and Scott bolted across the street, leaving Belville alone and, it must be confessed, disheartened and thoroughly home-sick. The glimpse Scott had shown him of the sort of men with whom he would have to come into daily contact, together with what he said of the worst characters

down the line, made him long to be once more back among the ignorant and slow-going but kindly people of Plainfield. He sighed at thought of his vanishing dreams. Not that he feared the vicious characters among whom fate seemed to have thrust him; but he knew that his life among them would be full of trials and vexations. While indulging in these unhappy meditations, he became so absorbed in them that a light touch on his shoulder startled him. His confusion increased when he recognised the person who had interrupted his brown study as none other than the redoubtable "Six-shooter Smith"; and he afterwards confessed to Larry that downright fear caused his teeth to chatter audibly, as Smith accosted him with: "Lacking the price for a drink, youngster?"

Belville had never tasted liquor. Years before his father's death he had promised him that he never would, and he had kept the promise religiously. He was rather a determined young man, but this was the first time that temptation had assumed such an imperative form. He is scarcely to be blamed if, for once, he hesitated. He felt his hair lifting under his hat as he stammered an excuse.

"I fail to understand you," said the stranger, with

a puzzled expression. "You seem to be suffering from several things, and terror seems to be one of them. Are you labouring under some delusion?"

"No — no, M-m-m-ister S-Smith; I —"

He was thankful all his life that the stranger interrupted him, with, "Bless me, boy, my name isn't Smith! It's Hamilton. Dispatcher on the Mexican Central. I was right. You had made a mistake. Tell me: what did you think I was?"

"And you're not the U. S. Marshal?"

"Botheration, no! Are you an embezzler?"

Belville burst into an hysterical laugh, and Mr. Hamilton was forced to join. When he could catch his breath, Belville hastened to make a full explanation; and these two, so oddly met, afterwards became the warmest of friends; but it is certain that to his dying day Belville will remember the terrible fright he experienced at the hands of that fabulous personage, Six-shooter Smith, U. S. Marshal.

PART II

SPARKS AND LARKS

CHAPTER IX

THE LINE

Wherein they cross it.

IT required no very great knowledge of character to discern that Mr. Hamilton was a man to rely on. Larue and Belville agreed that to have awakened his interest was a piece of rare good fortune; nor did the sequel prove them mistaken in this.

The three left the "Fashion" and walked together to the depot, the boys telling Mr. Hamilton something of themselves on the way. Mr. Hamilton said little, but by a series of well directed questions, soon placed himself in possession of all they had to tell. When they reached the station, he offered to assist them in getting across the river into Mexico. "There's a donkey-engine runs over," he said, "with a car to match. Turn your trunks over to me and I'll get them passed by the customs."

They boarded the car, which slowly trundled them out of their native land; and Mr. Hamilton, having satisfied his curiosity about them, became more communicative and gave them some information about the railway and its system.

"I wish I might offer you positions," he said, "but just at present my division is full. I will give you a letter to Mr. Bagnell, at Chihuahua, and I have no doubt he will be able to fix you up."

When the car reached the Mexican end of the bridge, it stopped to take on board the customs inspectors, who were both prompt and polite in the performance of their duties. Thanks to Mr. Hamilton, their luggage was passed with scarcely a glance; and in a few moments they arrived at the Mexican Central depot, a modern, two-story building, unique in the ancient town and strangely in contrast with its low adobe neighbours.

There was no south-bound train leaving Paso del Norte until the following morning, and Mr. Hamilton invited the boys to be his guests. "My 'trick' doesn't start until midnight," he said; "and as we have half the afternoon left suppose we see something of Paso before going home to dinner."

It was just what the boys were eager for; and

though they afterwards visited the most important of the Mexican cities, with which Paso del Norte could in no way compare in points of interest, they never forgot that afternoon ramble about the picturesque callas and quaint corners of Paso del Norte, with genial Mr. Hamilton as their guide and interpreter. He led them through lanes where queer little carts with enormous wooden wheels, drawn by oxen or donkeys, were creaking along over the rough cobble pavement, bearing samples of the strange produce of the country. He took them into the tiendas, that did not greatly differ from the little shops of Santa Fé, save that the people were more picturesque. The loungers were mostly peons in white cotton garments, with bright coloured sashes wound about their slim waists, rude leather sandals strapped to the soles of their bare brown feet, their heads crowned with wide-brimmed, high-peaked, straw sombreros.

At the Plaza they had their first taste of "tieste," a sweetish drink made from ground parched-corn, milk and chocolate, and one of the most delicious things to be found in a Mexican menu.

From the Plaza, Mr. Hamilton took them to the cock-pit, where there was a fight advertised for that afternoon; though Sundays are the grand fêtes when

the finest of the prize cocks are pitted to battle. For an hour they watched the contest, and here the difference in the boys' nature was manifested. Both were equally interested at the start; for the circle of seats was crowded with a motley throng, each member of which was a novelty. There were the soft-eyed peons, with whom the streets had somewhat familiarised the boys, but besides them were gaucheros and vaqueros from the ranches, native gamblers clad in velvet and silk, and gorgeously attired "Mountain-men," the designation charitably bestowed upon the nomadic Mexican bandits of the hills. Cowboys and miners from the American side were here and there in the throng; and there were not a few female figures, draped in loose gowns of black silk, with lace sleeves that did not conceal their white arms gleaming, and each with a red rose tucked coquettishly in her hair that was black as jet, but soft and wavy, and was held in place by combs of silver and gold filigree. Black lace mantillas and fans supplied the place of hats.

But the chief point of interest centred in the pit, where two cocks were being exhibited and trained, each with two men to attend to it and to see that it was properly exercised. Round about them were

grouped the bettors, and wagers were being laid thick and fast.

It was all like pantomime to Belville and Larue, for the shouts and general babel of voices dealt only with Spanish. A band of three pieces was blatantly playing one of the Mexican national airs, and dark-skinned, bare-legged vendors were going about crying their sweetmeats, preserved fruits and tieste.

The master of ceremonies was a fat Mexican wearing a red plush vest heavily crossed with gold watch-chains and above which floated a highly ruffled white shirt front. At a signal from him the pandemonium suddenly ceased.

¡The attendants picked up the cocks and carefully fastened upon their slim legs the long steel gaffs with edges sharp as razors, which serve to make the Mexican cock-fight more bloody, but also more swift and merciful, than those which are sometimes held even yet in our chivalrous South.

When the knives were properly fastened, the attendants held up the birds for inspection, to evidence that the game was to be fairly played; then each retired to a corner, and the first round opened.

The two cocks were well worth seeing then. Each was intent on combat and each fully persuaded

that he was to become the victor. The one at the boys' right was a slim, black game, with comb closely pared to his smooth, glossy head, and his black neck curving proudly, as he advanced with slow, stately steps to the centre of the pit. At their left the other bird, somewhat heavier of build and of a bright red colour, disdainfully watched the black cock's approach and waited, alert. His attendant finally pushed him out gently to make him attack his opponent, but this he did not seem quite ready to do, and there were cries from the audience of " Cobardo ! "

Having neared the other, the black cock circled round him with head low and wings slightly raised. Then suddenly the feathers on the black cock's neck ruffled and, with the grace of a swallow, he leaped upon his foe. This seemed to be what the red bird had been waiting for. He appeared to be prepared for the black one's lunge. Catching the latter's steel spur on his wing, he leaned far backward and dealt a quick blow, so quick as to be almost imperceptible. The black cock shivered and staggered back with the red blood spurting from an ugly gash in his side.

Amid a chorus of cheers, an attendant caught up the wounded bird, whose head was drooping, and

taking a mouthful of water from a glass, spurted it over the eyes and bill of his charge, under which treatment the latter slowly rallied. The wound was closed by pressing it together and smoothing the feathers clotted with blood until they formed a sort of bandage. A short time was given to resting and betting; then came the second round.

This proved less decisive. The red cock, over-confident from the result of the first round, so easily won, swiftly flew at the black one, intent only on pursuing its advantage. It proved to have been at the sacrifice of his best weapon, his prudence. The black bird, still somewhat dizzy, groggily avoided the red, but as the latter pressed him his pristine vigour seemed to return, for with incredible lightness and accuracy he plunged both spurs into the red game's back. Both cocks rolled upon their sides and lay there fluttering helplessly, unable to extricate themselves from the tangle. The moments slipped by as still as death until the time-keeper raised his hand to announce the end of the second round.

Both cocks now needed attention. They were washed and sprayed and tended most carefully, the attendants even breathing for them by placing the

enthusiasm increased and Belville's diminished in almost equal ratio. The interest of each remained fully alive, but Larue's was totally different from Belville's. The former, though shocked somewhat at the brutality of the sport, closed his eyes, for the time at least, to the painful features of it, and with the relish of the street Arab steeled himself to a point of keen enjoyment. Belville, meanwhile, passed from an awakening of pity for the birds to resentment against those who trained them and encouraged such abuse of any of God's creatures.

Mr. Hamilton laid his hand gently on Belville's arm. "Come," he said. "It is finished."

They walked out, following the crowd.

"Would you like to know," he continued, "why it was that I brought you here? It is because I know of no place nor circumstance which so admits of an insight into human character. I wanted to see how you boys would act. I hope you will forgive me for it."

"It would be impertinent," replied Belville slowly, "to criticise your kindness. But I think I shall never, to my dying day, forget the cruelty of it."

Larue linked his arm in Belville's. "Go back to Plainfield," he said lightly; "you're much too soft-hearted for Mexico."

Mr. Hamilton smiled and shook his head. "No, Larue," he said. "If we were all more like him in that, Mexico might be better worth while to live in."

CHAPTER X

DOTS AND DASHES

Jotted by the way.

MR. HAMILTON took Belville and Larue home with him and introduced them to a sweet little woman, whom he kissed and called "Mother," and to a tall, slight slip of a girl with merry eyes and nut-brown hair, whom he addressed as "Daughter." The two ladies made the boys feel at home at once. Miss Lucy informed her father that there was a "baile" on for that night and that she thought they ought to initiate their visitors into the mysteries of a Mexican fandango. Mr. Hamilton demurred. He was tired, and preferred to rest after dinner until time for him to be at his office; but he had no objections to the ladies doing the honours; and so it was finally arranged.

Shortly after dinner, the ladies, dressed in light evening gowns and, as a concession to the customs of the country, hatless and bare-handed, started out on the arms of our friends to walk to the Aduana build-

ing, which, containing the only large hall in the town, was the place of holding the " baile."

Belville escorted Mrs. Hamilton; for Larue and Lucy, though so shortly met, already were on excellent terms. They saw the ladies to their dressing-room; then stepping to one side to await their return, they took note of the throng that was entering.

" Bell," said Larue, impulsively, " that's the first time in me life that I ever knew a real lady; and, Bell — say, don't laugh at me — it's the first time in all me life that I've ever had one hooked to me. I just can't get over the feeling."

" What was it like? " Belville asked, smothering a smile.

" Like a feather-duster tickling your back and brushing away the cobwebs from a badly neglected conscience. Bell, I'm a poor ignoramus — I don't know much but the worst side of life — but I've got me idea of angels; and if those walls in there could know what a sweet, pure girl had just gone in between 'em they'd be so proud and happy they'd bust their plaster! "

The ladies soon rejoined them and they entered the gaily decorated hall, where the dancing had already commenced. Securing seats that commanded

a view of the room, they feasted their eyes upon the spectacle before them.

Though the night was yet young, the hall was comfortably filled; but most of those present were spectators, not having as yet become enthused to the point of joining in the dance. Many were in correct evening dress, members of the Spanish aristocracy, which, with the customs and military officials comprised the élite of the city. The latter were in dress uniforms, resplendent with gold braid, medals and decorations, but though picturesque they were utterly cast in the shade by the contingent of young bloods who, aping the mountaineer dress, adhered to the ancient Mexican costumes. No other masculine habit admits of such display of colour and ornamentation, and none could be better suited to the character of its wearers and their surroundings. The slashes of red against the black velvet above the high-heeled boots; the rows of jingling silver disks running from the feet to the waistband; the crimson sash encircling the waist, accentuating the snowy whiteness of the ruffles falling gracefully above it; the short Zouave jacket, heavily trimmed with filagree work both of gold and of silver; all these attract but a passing glance. It is on the smiling red lips above, the even

white teeth, the olive cheeks, the flashing black eyes, straight pencilled brows, high receding temples, and the crown of raven hair, that the gaze is apt to linger.

Though a trifle ungallant to accord them only second place, next to the gaily decked caballeros the ladies claimed Belville's attention. There was little of striking beauty; no doubt more of this might be found in any gathering of an equal number of our fair American women; but, aside from the attraction exerted by the novel Mexican attire, the fleecy rebosas, fluttering fans, rustling silks and laces, below which tiny slippers kept time to the measure of the music, there was a fascination in the dark, languorous eyes and the soft, low, songful Spanish breathed from smiling lips of red, that captured and held admiration bound as if by some spell of magic. The weird sweet notes of the " danza " rose and fell on the perfumed air that was heavy with gifts from the roses, and as the harmonies ebbed and flowed the graceful dancers marked each new strain with new poesies of motion; now bending low in grave salutes, now swaying like willows caressed by the breeze, now turning beneath uplifted arms that gleamed white beneath lace mantillas, now twining like garlands of

brilliant flowers in a multitude of undulating forms that drifted and swirled and scattered.

There came a swish of silken skirts and a couple of flashes from black eyes as a bevy of dancers fluttered past; and Belville started, as if from a trance, glanced quickly at his companions and, relieved to find them absorbed in their own conversation, stooped quickly forward and captured a rose that one of the passers had carelessly lost — or had it been dropped so carelessly?

That night when they retired to their room, Belville took the rose from his breast and turned it slowly round and round between his thumb and finger; then, obeying a sudden impulse, he pressed a kiss upon it.

"Ah ha! A memento?" asked Larue.

"Yes; of a delightful evening."

"I must confess you surprise me, Bell. I presume I was too much engaged meself to properly chaperon you — but I hadn't the faintest idea you could be capable of indulging in a flirtation."

"It wasn't a flirtation."

"No? Something more serious, then? 'Fess up, Bell: which of the fair ones with raven hair plucked the rose from her tresses for you?"

Belville smiled and shook his head.

"You won't tell? For shame, Belville!"

"I do not know," replied Belville, truthfully.

CHAPTER XI

THE BREAK

Not a bad one.

"IT'S a queer country, Bell."

Belville grunted an affirmative; he was too busy retaining his seat to make a more dignified answer.

"Yes, it's a queer country," Larue continued complacently, "where they call corn 'mice,' — compliment to corn's chief enemy, I guess — and where they speak of a jackass as a 'bureau.'"

"But they — spell — it — m-a-i-z-e," replied Belville, between jolts; "and it's — b-u-r-r-o,— instead of — 'b-u-r-e-a-u.'"

"Bureau's a proper nickname, anyhow," replied Larry, with a grimace. "Burros, like bureaus, have four legs without joints; and it takes an equal amount of energy to move 'em."

The truth of which was so apparent that Belville did not argue the question.

They were undergoing the novel experience of a

ride astride two Mexican donkeys which, in spite of the boys' kicks, doggedly refused to budge until urged by the shouts and prodded by the poles of the peon drivers. They sat far back on the hind-quarters of the shaggy little animals, and managed to stand the exercise for a half hour or so, during which time they traversed about a mile. Then they dismounted, paid the drivers, and limped painfully back to the plaza in front of the Chihuahua hotel. As they sank down on one of the benches of the park-like square, Belville remarked regretfully, "We might better have sat on the hotel porch, at a greater elevation, where the seats would have been far more comfortable and the prospect just as enchanting."

"But," retorted Larry, "think of the amusement we provided for the natives — would you have the heart to deprive them of it?"

Mexican burros are useful creatures, however. They are the chief beasts of burden in Mexico. The boys soon became accustomed to meeting trains of them, each sad-eyed creature bearing a load fully double its own slight weight. The only other conveyances to be seen in Chihuahua were the primitive carts with two immense wooden wheels fastened solidly to a revolving wooden axle, the creaking of

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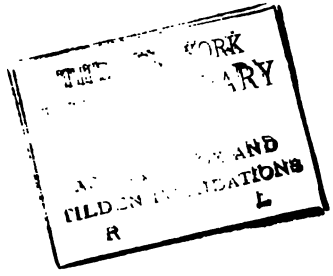
which may be heard for miles as they are jolted over the cobble-paved streets drawn by teams of slowly moving bullocks. Sometimes a single ox is harnessed to one of these odd affairs and the driver sits on the high cross-board perch holding reins that are hitched to the animal's horns and indulging in catnaps between the steps of his fiery steed.

It was the boys' first day in Chihuahua. They had bidden adieu to the Hamiltons and the quaint old city of Paso del Norte, and were again seeking their fortunes. Ere they left him, Mr. Hamilton provided them with transportation to Chihuahua and a personal letter to Mr. Bagnell, the dispatcher in charge of the Chihuahua office, and who, upon its presentation that morning, promised them positions. They were now waiting for orders; and having nothing else to do, they whiled the afternoon away by roaming about the city. They visited the stately cathedral, a fine old church whose imposing front is studded with statues of the saints and covered with intricate designs executed in stucco — though much disfigured by the pits made by rebellious bullets, for the plaza has been the scene of many a hard-fought battle. They tramped about the narrow streets, catching occasional glimpses through open portals of

Chihuahua, from the Cathedral belfry.

Ox-carts, with great wooden wheels.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attractive interior courtyards, surrounded by broad verandas wherein the residents seemed to be spending the better part of their lives in dreamy idleness. More rarely they saw a face at one of the iron-bound and barred windows and always found it worth looking at; for it was always a woman's face; and the face of a Mexican woman, be she young or old, rich or poor, is never without the attraction which beautiful eyes always exert.

As they returned to the plaza a band in the little elevated stand at the centre was rendering that charming air, so peculiarly Mexican in every note that small wonder Mexico claims it, the weird and haunting "La Paloma"; and the boys lounged lazily in their seats, enjoying the strangeness of it all, and sipping frescas and pinas, sweet drinks made from the fresh native fruits which they purchased for a tlaca apiece from the bare-footed, brown-skinned vendors.

The boys then walked across the plaza to one of the small shops that faced upon it. Here they received their first lesson in the peculiar financial system in vogue in the State of Chihuahua. There are several kinds of money in circulation and it is puzzling to a stranger to keep track of the various pre-

miums and discounts on foreign and native monies, paper, copper, silver and gold, and which are always fluctuating.

Larue secured his apricots and tendered an American dollar in payment. The merchant returned to him, as his change, a dollar and eighty cents in Mexican silver. As they munched the apricots, Larry bought a package of cerillos, wax matches that when lighted serve as tapers. He handed to the merchant the silver Mexican dollar he had just received, and to his surprise received, as change, three paper bills which possessed a total face value of a dollar and fifty cents.

"Quiere usted mas?" (Do you wish anything more?) asked the merchant, as Larue inspected the "Carajo" money he had received for the first time.

Larry turned to Belville and said, "There are one or two more things here I might buy, but I won't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be Christian. If I'd make a few more purchases here this poor, ignorant fellow would be busted."

Upon returning to their hotel they found a note from Mr. Bagnell which instructed Belville to go to

Bachimba, to relieve its operator there for a short vacation, and Larue was commissioned to Juanita. Transportation for both boys was enclosed and they were asked to take that evening's train. They had just time enough to pack up and catch it comfortably, and were soon on their way up the Mexican plateau.

Bachimba was not far from Chihuahua, but Juanita was several hundred miles to the south, and the boys felt more than one pang of regret at their forced separation.

"Never mind," said Larry, putting his arm around Belville; "we can swap experiences with each other every night, as of old — unless there should happen to be a relay station between us."

"But we won't use a ground wire," said Belville, smiling.

"We won't have to. There's plenty of time to talk when the wires are idle. If we should have anything of a private nature to discuss, it had better be done by letter."

Bachimba was reached all too soon. It proved to be but a "jumping-off" place. There was nothing to be seen but the small depot building and a couple of twinkling switch-lights. The operator whom Bel-

ville was relieving informed him that the hacienda building of Bachimba rancho was not far away and that he would find the Terrazas family "great people;" which was somewhat consoling.

"They'll be over to see you in the morning," he said, "for they know a new Gringo is coming. Here's your outfit of kettles and pans. You'll find the closet well stocked with raw grub — what? You can't cook? Well, you've got to learn then. Better wire for a supply of pills; you'll need 'em till you get through experimenting. You'll get used to it, though. You'll have to. I did. If you can't, I'll be back in two weeks. And when I do get back I'll give you a decent funeral, if I find you're in need of it."

Having thus cheerfully installed him, the operator boarded the train for Jimenez; and Belville bade Larue farewell; then stood alone on the platform watching the lights of the train that was bearing his chum away. They faded into the distance and far off on the prairie a coyote howled. No other sound broke the silence; even the instruments were still; and as Belville turned into the little unpainted shack that was to be his first Mexican home, he experienced the loneliest moment of all his young existence.

CHAPTER XII

THE DUPLEX

One that objected to carrying double.

"BUENAS dias, Señor!"

Belville straightened himself with a start and turned toward the door to his office; then he blushed to the roots of his wavy brown hair, and a ripple of merry laughter from the little group of visitors peering in through the doorway did not tend to lessen his confusion. Belville, dressed only in shirt and trousers and with a towel tied about his waist, had been struggling to concoct a breakfast out of the raw materials that he had found stowed away in the closet. The top of the small coal-stove was red hot; the coffee-pot was boiling over; and beside it stood a pan whose unnameable contents represented the result of Belville's first attempt to manufacture flap-jacks. The top of his desk presented a heterogeneous medley of bags, dishes and dirty pots; the floor, the chair, the table, the stove, and the

usually neat Belville himself, were decorated with splashes of flour and daubs of dough from the unruly batter; and the atmosphere was permeated with the odour of charred provisions.

Under such circumstances small wonder Belville felt embarrassed, when, upon hearing the Spanish salute, he turned to find himself confronted by three smiling faces and two of them belonging to two of the prettiest señoritas that he had seen since his arrival in Mexico!

"The señor does not well with the cooking, Luis," said the elder girl to her brother, a handsome, dark-skinned youth of perhaps fifteen years. "Perhaps," striving to subdue a laugh, and half to him, half to Belville, "perhaps he will let us to help him."

Belville recovered the use of his tongue and, making the best of his predicament, stammered "Good morning," and bade his visitors enter. He then explained to them that this was his first attempt to prepare a meal, and that he had not yet breakfasted.

"Paubrecito!" exclaimed the younger girl, when Luis had translated this to her.

"Sit you down with our brother," said the elder, "and let us to do it for you. This is Luis; this Anita; and I, señor, am Mercedes. We are come to

invite you to dine with our father, the Don Luis Terrazas, at Bachimba Rancho."

Belville expressed his acknowledgments of their kindness and, after introducing himself, proceeded to make himself somewhat more presentable. Meanwhile, the two girls were not idle. What he had striven so hard to prepare they ruthlessly sacrificed. A new pot of coffee was placed on the stove and a new pan of batter quickly prepared, that, as if by magic it seemed to Belville, was converted into nicely browned cakes; after which they all did him the honour to breakfast with him.

Belville endeavoured to converse with Luis, but he found that the latter was not nearly so familiar with English as was Mercedes. Luis was most anxious to learn, however, and offered to instruct Belville in his own musical tongue in exchange for lessons in English. Anita spoke but a few words of English and therefore was almost a silent factor. Mercedes informed Belville that she had studied English at school in Chihuahua, and had greatly improved her knowledge of the language through her acquaintance with his predecessor.

"Our father can speak," said Mercedes, "but he does not like — only when there is more need — so

he helps us not with our English. Come, Luis: should we not to go?"

The mustangs that Luis had tethered back of the station were brought and the girls were helped into their saddles. After the departure of his guests Belville put the office to rights and made his report to the dispatcher, which consisted of merely, "G.M." There were no cars on the siding; no water-tank; and no call for a weather report, for the weather there at all times is the same, with skies so clear that Belville used sometimes to wish for a good old-fashioned down-pour.

As the day was Sunday, there would be no trains until late that night; and there was no reason why he should not have gone to the rancho with his new acquaintances, as they had urged that he should do when they were on the point of leaving; but it was his first day's service and he wished to familiarise himself with his new surroundings.

He examined the office records and quickly mastered the method of keeping them; then he listened attentively for an hour or more to what was passing over the wire, and noted, with some misgivings, that all of the commercial telegrams were in the Spanish language. He tried very hard to copy these, but al-

most every sentence contained a puzzling symbol or two with which he was unfamiliar. He waited until the wire became idle and then called up the dispatcher, who set him right by explaining that these were Spanish characters which the English alphabet did not contain.

So much accomplished, Belville began to regret that he had not gone to the rancho in company with his visitors. He gazed through the window wistfully across the yellow valley to the distant hills that marked the western horizon; and he could not help thinking that Plainfield was a perfect metropolis compared to this desert wilderness.

Had he formed some acquaintance along the line with whom he might have chatted he would have felt less lonely, but there was no one. It was with unmixed pleasure therefore that presently he spied a horseman making toward the station. He went out on the platform to greet him. It proved to be young Luis, returning in search of a lesson.

Luis' bright eyes soon discerned that the young "Gringo" was homesick, and he resolved to cure him of it. Before the lesson had proceeded far he interrupted Belville by declaring that he must return to the hacienda, and insisted that Belville should go

there with him. It had been planned, he explained, for a mozo to bring over an extra horse later on for Belville to ride, but they would not wait for the servant. The place was but a league away, and the mustang Luis had with him was one that his sisters frequently rode. It was big and strong, and well broken, and it certainly would carry double.

Belville eyed the gaunt beast with some distrust, but Luis urged that it was perfectly gentled; Belville should take the saddle and Luis, who was lighter, would ride behind.

Belville had been told some tall stories about bucking bronchos and he was rather suspicious; but Luis was so confident that finally he was persuaded.

He asked for leave from the dispatcher, and this obtained, proceeded somewhat gingerly to climb into the saddle. The big mustang seemed as quiet as a cow, and he was mentally labelling the tales he had been told as fiction when Luis vaulted up behind him. Then the fun began — for the horse. He planted his four feet, dropped his back, and Belville didn't know what more he did, for he himself shot toward the zenith with Luis clinging desperately to him. As they came down, the horse bucked again, and Belville afterward declared that he would rather be

struck by a moving train than to have the thing repeated.

Three times that gentle mustang bucked, and Belville felt that his ears were bursting. Then Luis plunged his spurs in deep and that mustang started. There was no stopping him then. Belville clung to his mane and Luis clung to Belville and they both held their breath as the mustang skimmed over ditches, cactus and sage, making a straight bee-line of it for the hacienda building. Somehow they managed to keep on the animal's back, but how they could never satisfactorily explain to each other. The mustang never swerved until he dashed through the main portal to his home and into the courtyard of the hacienda. In the centre of the broad patio he stopped as if suddenly turned to stone. The two boys kept on going, and, when Belville had wiped the dirt from his eyes, there on the wide veranda, convulsed with laughter, sat the entire Terrazas family.

Old Don Luis said never a word but stalked out into the courtyard and, picking up his fifteen-year-old son as if he were but a feather, shook him vigorously. Belville gathered himself up and looked on aghast.

"There!" said Don Luis, freeing his son, "that will teach you to fall off a horse! Welcome, Don Maurice Belville!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE THUMB-SCREW

Its Mexican application.

DON LUIS TERRAZAS, though stern and dignified, was the soul of hospitality. After seeing that Belville's clothing was relieved of its accumulation of dust (not, however, in the manner he had dusted his son's,) he proceeded to show his guest about the premises.

For farther than the eye could reach in every direction spread the broad miles of his rancho; fifty miles wide, Don Luis guessed that it was; a mile or two more or less did not matter in that land of magnificent distances. Its length? Why, to the ocean! And over this vast area of plain and mountain, river and lake, ranged Don Luis' uncounted herds of wild horses and wilder cattle.

"It is not much," said Don Luis, with a deprecating shrug of his shoulders. "My brother's rancho — ah, that is like! But my little one must suffice for me. Besides, it is quite enough. We have food and drink and wherewithal to clothe ourselves.

With those, and health, one perforce should be content." All of which was somewhat amusing in view of the fact that Don Luis was a millionaire many times over, with some six hundred servants at his beck and call to execute his commissions.

He led Belville through a grove of sweetly fragrant fig-trees and down to the shore of an artificial lake, the cool, clear waters of which were brought from the mountains many miles distant by skilfully constructed acequias. Here the wild geese flocked in winter; and though Don Luis was fond of gunning he would let no one disturb them, but would make long and tiresome journeys into the hills of his rancho to obtain a shot at their fellows. "It is because," he explained, "that these are guests of my rancho."

They skirted the margin of the lake, passed through an orchard of apricots, and came out back of the northern wall of the hacienda building, at the portion which contained the stables. Here were some fifty fine mustangs, the pick of the herds, which were maintained for the use of the family and house-servants. Adjoining the stables, in the western angle, were the servants' quarters, extending to the kitchens. The latter led on to the dining-rooms;

then followed the family's apartments; the whole being under one continuous brown tile roof, and surrounding the pleasant patio which occupied a square about three hundred feet in length by half that in width. The portion of the northern end of this huge building that was not included in the stables and the angle that led from it on the east to the centrally located portals on the southern exposure contained store rooms of many kinds, workshops of various sorts, and also included a dark room whose walls were heavily reinforced. This was used as a gaol for offenders. Outside the wall by the stables were the stocks, pillory and whipping-post, gruesome objects of interest to Belville, for they were the first he had ever beheld.

"I use them not often," said Don Luis; "they are for the minor offences."

"Of what do the minor offences consist?"

"Of drunkenness — negligence — laziness — disobedience."

"What are major offences?"

"Things grossly criminal — theft, murder, robbery, mutiny."

"And how are such offences punished, Don Luis?"

Don Luis smiled grimly. "Depending upon the degree of the offence and the character of the offender; sometimes the bastinado; usually the rifle."

Belville could not repress a shudder. "Surely," he protested, "surely you do not punish theft with death?"

"Why not? A thief is a nuisance. A man who steals once will steal twice. It is not so much for his punishment; not alone that it may deter others; it is to abate the nuisance."

"How are thieves tried when they are caught?"

"A thief is more often trapped; caught red-handed. We suspect. Bueno. We trap him; for once a thief, always a thief, and we watch for him to steal again. If he is not to be caught by traps and we still have cause to suspect him, he may be persuaded to tell the truth — these friends (pointing to the stock, pillory and whipping-post,) these are good persuaders."

"But surely you will give him a trial — have you not some sort of jury system?"

Don Luis smiled cynically. "You Americanos! You think that juries are fair? Paubrecitos! You shut your eyes to injustice. Do you get justice by

your jury trials? The cleverest lawyer; the longest purse; the perjured witness; the manufactured evidence — such things as these decide your Americano trials by jury. No, Don Maurice. I am judge and jury. Am I not the Alcalde? And these whom I judge, are they not my peons? What has a peon with juries?"

"What constitutes a peon, Don Luis?"

"A peon is a debtor servant."

"For how long is he bound to serve?"

"Till he pays his debt. That is never."

"How is that?"

"His debt increases year by year. These peons of ours are lazy. They never earn what they consume. When a peon dies he leaves his debt a legacy to his children."

"You cannot mean by that that they are bound by his debt?"

"Surely. Why not?"

"How if they refuse to recognise their father's debt to you, and refuse to serve you?"

"Disobedience? These good friends. Mutiny?" Don Luis gave a significant shrug.

"Are none of them ever freed then?"

"Sometimes they steal away to the hills. If such are caught they are punished. Usually they are caught. Those that are not become bandits."

"Are there not many that run away?"

"Not from Bachimba rancho. They do not care to leave me, for I aim to be kind, as well as just; to my peons I am as a father. There are alcaldes who are not kind and such have much of trouble. They would not be questioned, as I am by you — you see I am more frank, Don Maurice." And Don Luis smiled peculiarly.

Belville blushed and replied apologetically, "You have been more than patient with me, Don Luis. I hope you will pardon my questions. I presume I have been too inquisitive. But it is all so strange to me — so different from the life of our working folk at home. I would be grateful if you would tell me more of it."

"What you wish. I have naught to conceal. It is the law."

"These bandits —"

"We may call them so, entre nous; but you must not call them so in conversation with others. It is wiser to call them as they call themselves: 'Mountain men' or 'Caballeros.'"

"These mountain men, then: where may they be found?"

"Make any trip over the mountains; you will be lucky if you fail to find them. They live in the wild places from which conveniently they may raid the mountain passes, to rob and to murder travellers. The government punishes when it can; oftener it cannot. They are wise in whom they attack; it is always the stranger — and they know, usually, what that stranger is. They have friends — paid spies — in all cities, who give them advance information. They never molest the ranchos, and at many of these, therefore, they are treated as welcome visitors."

"Surely no rancho would welcome one of its runaway peons?"

"The runaway goes many leagues, if he can. Should there be one from here, we will say, he would pause not this side of Durango. Those who may live in the hills about here may have come from ranchos far to the south. More likely, though, they may have been free men for a century. There are many more of the free mountain-men than there are of the runaway peons. It is that the runaway peons join them. The mountain-men in Mexico have many

villages of their own, where they live in peace among themselves upon what they raise, for the mountain glens are fertile. Then it is only when chance decrees that they molest the passers."

"Do they ever visit Bachimba?"

"Sometimes. Not often. There are but few in this part of the country. Most are far to the south, or to the west. Here there are sometimes Apaches, and with them a few mountain-men, sometimes. They are wolves, these Apaches. But you do not need to fear them now. It is long since they molested the ranchos."

"I have heard of their famous chief, Jeronimo; I should not care to meet them."

"We will hope the trouble is over with them. But come: go we in to the comida."

They passed around to the main portal and rejoined the ladies and young Luis, who had forgotten his chastisement and recovered his cheerfulness.

The meal was ready for serving; and Don Luis' motherly Señora ushered Belville into the corridor and seated him at table beside her. That dinner was a revelation to Belville. From his experience at Mexican hotels, he had taken a dislike to the Mexican style of cooking. Now he discovered that

Mexican hotels were no sure guide. The fig-soup was so appetizing that he longed for a second serving; the chicken tomales and fried plantains; the mezclada of tropical vegetables; the chili-con-carne; the brown frijoles; and the dulce of prickly-pears which, with black coffee and cigarettes, concluded the meal — all were so delicious and so tastefully served that, at its close, he was ready to swear that no feast could be more enjoyable.

After dinner they adjourned to the veranda, where Don Luis smoked more cigarettes and drank his post-prandial glass of mezcal, the native cactus-brandy, while the others all sipped frescas. Then, in the dusk of the evening, Anita and young Luis brought their guitars and a walk to the lakeside followed. Here they treated Belville to Mexican songs, beneath the Mexican moonlight, while Don Luis seated with his señora in the shadow of a great mango tree listened to the voices of their children, both of them recalling the days when they, too, had been young, and their parents had sat beneath this same tree with them.

Old Don Luis Terrazas is living to-day. The young Don Luis of this narrative is now a man of middle age and was said to be the greatest cattle-

owner in the world — till Villa came to Mexico!

As these lines are being written, the American press is publishing accounts of how young Don Luis sought refuge recently in the British Consulate at Chihuahua, hoping thus to escape the Mexican rebels, but was taken from there by force and imprisoned. It is said that the rebels are holding him for a ransom of a quarter of a million of dollars.

It is the ardent hope of the writer than Don Luis Terrazas and his at present unfortunate son may both live to read these words of acknowledgment of the friendly courtesies which they and their hospitable family extended to an unknown "telegrafisto" at Bachimba in the days of which I am telling.

The Terrazas are not unique by any means. They do but represent a type of what is best in Mexico. If the world might better understand this, it would have more sympathy and love for our unfortunate neighbour.

PART III

SHOCKS AND FLASHES

CHAPTER XIV

THE POLE

Belville climbs one, and experiments with a live circuit.

WHEN the time came for Belville to bid good night to his new friends at the rancho and to thank them for one of the pleasantest days it had ever been his good fortune to enjoy, a peon brought out three mustangs, one for Belville and the others for Don Luis and his son, who insisted upon escorting him back to the railway station. They rode slowly along the trail; and Belville, at Don Luis' request, told them something of himself and of life in the great republic to which he owed allegiance.

The three miles were all too quickly traversed. When Belville dismounted at the depot, Don Luis expressed their regret that the young man was not to remain permanently, and gave him a hearty invitation to dine at the hacienda as often as he might

choose to honour them with his company. Then they wished him " dulce sueños," and cantered away in the moonlight.

As he watched the darkness swallow them up, Belville felt a pang of regret at the thought that he was to be there but two short weeks. He wondered if he were really the same youth who had been so thoroughly lonely and wretched but twenty-four short hours before.

He turned to enter his office. In doing so, he glanced down the track, and started guiltily. There was nothing in sight that should have served as cause for alarm, yet his feeling of guilt quickly changed to one of fear. The switch-lamps were burning brightly and showed the switches properly set; but they had been lighted by other hands than his, for Belville had not been there to light them!

He had taken the switch-lamps in and had trimmed them in the morning. Who had set them out again — and why?

Whoever had done it must have entered his office to obtain them; yet he had locked the door securely and had the key in his pocket. He took out the key and was about to thrust it into the lock; but he thought better of it and, passing around to the win-

dow, peered cautiously in. All was as he had left it, apparently, — no; not quite. Was that not one of the office wires dangling against the window pane? With a thrill of terror he realised that some one had tampered with the circuit. Where was the offender? What could have been his object?

Belville held his breath and listened. All was still; but the very silence seemed ominous. He ought to enter, repair the break, and report these things to the dispatcher. Should he?

He was again on the point of unlocking the door, when a slight sound caused him to change his mind. It sounded like a smothered sneeze. Was some one in the office, waiting there in the dark, to seize him when he might enter? If this were so, it was not for the purpose of robbing an operator. No. There was nothing of value about him but his father's old time-piece and that was of little worth to any one but its owner. They would not cut the wires — they would not set the switch-lamps — just to rob an operator. They might do both these things if their object were to wreck the midnight train!

Bachimba was a flag-station for the express. The train would not stop unless signalled — or unless —

Suppose the switch had been broken and the signal bar twisted to show the green light?

Belville's heart throbbed violently. He had been told of recent attempts at train wrecking further to the south. He remembered the tales that he had heard about the wolfish Apaches and the more fiendish whites and half-breeds who led them in their raids. Suppose some of these were concerned in this? Suppose their object were to loot the train? What could he do to prevent it?

With a calmness bred of desperation, for he felt that each movement he made might be watched, he walked to the edge of the platform and, whistling softly, sat down upon it, took out his pocket-knife and nervously began to carve. But his thoughts were busy. What should he do? Something must be done soon, if at all. There remained but a scant half hour ere the train would be due to leave Chihuahua.

Presently he rose resolutely and, crossing the tracks, sauntered directly away from the station, all the time whistling softly; though he did not know at what moment a shot might take him in the back. It was the most trying moment of his life, yet he compelled himself to walk slowly, whistling the liveliest air he knew.

Paralleling the railway tracks and at a distance of about a hundred yards from them was a little swale, into which the ground fell away suddenly. Could he but reach this he would be hidden from the eyes of any one who might be on watch at the office. The yards seemed miles ere he traversed them; but the protecting swale was reached at length and, for the moment, he was safe — or felt so. It would be an easy matter now to slip away to the rancho, which would ensure his own safety; but it might prove to be at the cost of a score of lives on the south-bound express. By the time he could reach the rancho, waken Don Luis and the servants and secure their aid, plan for the miscreants' capture and return to carry such plans into effect, it would be too late to save the train. Besides it was more than possible that Don Luis would not be willing to interfere. His conversation had shown plainly enough that none of the residents cared to incur the enmity of the mountain-men, who would be sure to retaliate upon any who might molest them. Perhaps the bandits might be counting on this and, though suspecting his flight to the rancho, would not let that alarm them.

Bending low that he might not be discovered, he

ran along the swale toward the north as fast as his legs could carry him. As he ran, the darkness deepened, for the moon was setting; and though his way became more difficult and he stumbled and fell more than once over clumps of thorny cactus, he did not heed their poisonous pricks but rejoiced at the deepening darkness that ensured him against discovery in the attempt which he had decided to make.

Resolutely, he ran the length of the little swale and then crawled cautiously back to the tracks. Here he listened attentively. All was still at the station, but there was a noise somewhere off to the west, as of horses pawing with impatience.

With a beating heart Belville made his way to the switch. It was as it should be. Evidently, if his suspicions were right, it was the other switch that had been broken. From the switch he made his way cautiously up the track till he felt that there was no more time to spare, when he made for the nearest telegraph pole. This was a crucial moment; for, to accomplish what he had in mind to do, he must scale the pole and break the wire. While doing this, his outline against the sky might be seen by those at the station, in which event he would be at their mercy.

To climb a pole was no easy matter, but Belville had scaled one before, on a "dare" in a spirit of boyish bravado; and with the present incentive it did not take him long to reach the cross-arm. With the file of his pocket-knife he tackled the wire, first wrapping his handkerchief tightly around the insulator fastenings to muffle the sound, for the noise of the filing might travel to the office, and the slightest unusual occurrence might put those who were in hiding there on their guard.

It seemed an interminable task with so small a file, but the wire finally gave way. Belville slid back down the pole to the ground, searched for and found the end of the broken wire, and was able to breathe more freely.

To serve as a ground, a short piece of the wire was quickly detached and thrust deep down in the sandy earth; and Belville hoped that he had secured the power to open and close the circuit.

It was a wild experiment upon the success or failure of which a great deal of property and many human lives might depend; but if the line and the batteries along it were all right, he had hoped that a message would carry. He first made the order signal "9." This he repeated, with the call for the

dispatcher "C," until he felt that his signals must have attracted attention. Then carefully forming each dot and dash upon which so much might be depending, he sent an account of what had occurred.

Belville had used some old letters to insulate the wires where his hands came in contact with them, but as he finished the message he chanced to drop them and felt a light electric shock. It acted as an inspiration. Insulating the wires again, he sent: "Spell very slowly. Let me know if you heard. I may be able to read it."

Moistening his fingers, he clutched his ground wire firmly and, placing the end of the main wire between his teeth, he waited anxiously for a repetition of the shock. He did not have long to wait. With the first click of the dispatcher's key he nearly dropped the wire, for the shock was much stronger than he had anticipated; but he held on to it heroically. He found it almost impossible to distinguish between dots and dashes; but it was not a complete failure. His relief can better be imagined than described as he half guessed, half deciphered, the following: "— y — res — r-i — rri — speci — or — a — o — r — wait —ry —cap —c."

With nervous fingers he wired back: "Caught

enough to think you are warned and that you are planning something. Shall I wait here till train arrives? If so, reply with the word 'yes'; send very, very slowly."

Belville had found that he could read the dots fairly well, and in "yes" there were no dashes. Slowly the shocks came: two; a space; two more; another space, followed by one dot, the "e"; quite a long space; then three shocks in even succession. The experiment had succeeded.

As Belville gave the "OK," a light appeared in his office; and dropping the wires, he took to his heels and plunged into the sage-brush.

CHAPTER XV

THE TOLL

Of a misspent life.

BELVILLE had but a short time to wait, but it seemed an age to him before he heard the distant rumble that told of the approach of a train. The light still burned in his office, as he could see from his hiding-place. Some one came out and walked up the track toward him, at no great distance away; but, before reaching the point opposite him, as if satisfied with the result of his scouting, turned and went back to the station. This was the only incident that marked his anxious waiting.

As the train drew near, the bandits' horses tethered somewhere off to the west of the tracks, grew fractious at the unaccustomed sound and one of them neighed loudly. Belville could hear the tread of heavy feet hurriedly traversing the depot platform; then the noise of the train drowned all other sounds, the head-light of the engine flashed past him,

and the train came to a sudden stop directly in front of his office. There was a volley of rifle-shots, oaths and hoarse screams; a wild stampede toward the horses; more shots; more shouts; the tramp of hoofs galloping wildly away across the plain; and Belville rose from his hiding and flew down the track to the depot. As he reached the platform he came nearer death than he had been at any time that night. One of the guards fired at him, and the "ping-g-g-g-g" of the rifle ball as it fanned past him was a sound that he never forgot. He did the wisest thing possible by stopping short, with upraised arms, and waiting until the guard came to him. Then he explained, and was ushered into his office, where the conductor and brakemen were gathered with Mr. Bagnell, the dispatcher.

They congratulated Belville warmly for having saved the train, and listened attentively to his story, at the close of which they could not sufficiently praise his quick wit and courage. In the midst of it, the soldiers who had pursued the fleeing bandits returned.

The train, which was not the midnight express, was a special sent out ahead. It was shifted onto the siding, the lower switch of which was found to

have been broken and the bar twisted to show the green light, exactly as Belville had suspected. As the regular train went rumbling by, the dead and wounded were placed on board the special and the latter was ready for the return run to Chihuahua.

"Wouldn't you like a guard left with you, Belville?" asked Mr. Bagnell kindly.

"If you think one is needed," Belville replied.

"I do not think it at all likely that any of them would return here — even if they cared to do so, which is improbable. They cannot bear any grudge against you; they do not know you in the matter. There is nothing they could hope to gain now. I thought, though, that you might feel nervous at being left alone."

Belville smiled faintly. "To tell the truth," he said, "now that the thing is over, I feel an arrant coward. The shivers are chasing up and down my back-bone at the rate of sixty a second. I feel I must either laugh or cry — when you've gone I'll do both, most likely."

Mr. Bagnell walked over to the conductor and spoke to him for a moment, after which he returned to Belville, whose arm he took familiarly and marched him into his office. Belville glanced

through the window and saw that the special was getting under way.

"You will miss the train, sir," he cried.

Mr. Bagnell smiled. "That's all right," he said. "I've concluded to visit with you over night, till number fourteen in the morning."

"No, no," Belville protested; "I'll be all right. You're needed at Chihuahua. I'll have young Terrazas over from the rancho in the morning to keep me from getting lonely."

Mr. Bagnell looked at him keenly. "You're a gritty youngster," he said. "You're right; I am needed there. Here: take my gun, and good luck to you." With the words, Mr. Bagnell unbuckled his belt, which held a large Colt revolver and a score or more of cartridges (for Belville had said that he had no arms), laid it on the table and bolted out of the door just in time to catch the rear steps of the last car.

The place where Belville had tapped the wire had been repaired by the lineman whom Mr. Bagnell had brought on the special, and the breaks in the office wires had been spliced; so the sounder was ticking away merrily, and served as a sort of company. But no sooner had the special pulled out, leaving him

alone in that lonely place that had witnessed so terrible a tragedy, than Belville regretted from the bottom of his heart that, in a spirit of false pride, he had refused Mr. Bagnell's offer to remain. He would have given almost anything on earth to have had the dispatcher back again. He felt that he simply could not remain there alone another moment; yet where could he go? It was over three miles to the rancho — and what would Don Luis think of him should he go there and rouse them at such an hour?

Belville rose impulsively and put out the light as the thought came to him that it might expose him to a possible watcher. But the dark was still more dreadful. Nervously feeling for Mr. Bagnell's revolver, he overturned the ink-stand, and the ink that spilled over his fingers robbed him of his last spark of courage. Without stopping to find his weapon, he frantically rushed out of the office, crossed the track, and ran as if pursued by the Furies. He covered the hundred yards to the swale with the speed of a race-horse and, plunging over the little incline, stumbled over something soft and pitched head-long into the sand below, where he lay without power to move a muscle, for the thing he had stumbled over

had groaned, and he knew that it must be one of the wounded bandits.

The groan was followed by an agonized appeal: "Agua! Por le amor de Dios — Agua!"

Belville understood enough Spanish to know that the man was begging for water, and he realised that, as he had not been attacked, the fellow must be seriously wounded. Cautiously he rose to his feet; then paused, undecided. He could not desert a wounded man, though that man was an enemy, a wrecker of trains, an outlaw.

"I will come back in a moment," he muttered as, clambering up the bank of the swale, he returned to the office. He relighted the office lamp, buckled Mr. Bagnell's belt around his waist, examined the weapon to see that it was loaded and that it was free in the holster; then he dipped up a pitcher of water from the barrel that stood in the corner, lighted his lantern and, with these in hand, resolutely returned to the swale.

The wounded man was moaning feebly, and Belville had to raise his head and hold the pitcher to his lips. He drank greedily, and sank back exhausted, with the one word, "Thanks."

"You speak English?" asked Belville, in surprise.

The wounded man whispered an affirmative.

"It will not do for you to lie here. Can I help you to reach my office?"

"I'm — done; — unless you — carry —" There were painful pauses between each word.

Belville, by the light of the lantern, endeavoured to ascertain the nature of his wound. While he was trying to decide what to do he found that the man had fainted. Alarmed at this, Belville lifted him up as tenderly as possible and staggered to the depot with his burden. Fortunately the man was of slight stature, and though a heavy load for the youth he succeeded in carrying him. He got the man into his office and stretched him on his cot; then cut open the man's shirt, and staunched the ugly wound in his breast, which was still bleeding freely. When he had succeeded in stopping the flow he covered his patient with a blanket and bathed his face with cold water, under which treatment the man presently revived, then passed into a troubled sleep or stupor.

All night Belville sat by the wounded man. Strange as it afterwards seemed to him, he could not recall a moment of fear from the time when, in the swale, he had resolved to act the Good Samaritan.

As the sun rose above the horizon, the wounded man regained his senses. He beckoned Belville to come closer. "I'm done for," he said, in a voice that though scarcely above a whisper was yet without a tremble. "You have — been kind to — me. I want to —" A spasm of pain convulsed him, and he gasped feebly, "Water!"

Belville supported him as he drank, and asked with real solicitude: "Is there nothing that I can do for you?"

"Not now. It will soon be over."

"Have you no message you would like to leave?"

"Perhaps — one. I — have an — an uncle. He will be — glad — to know I am — dead. He — is good man — the Padre."

"Who and where is he?"

"Padre José — Conejos —"

Belville started up in amazement: "Are *you* Chita's father?"

"Chita? You mean —"

"I mean the young girl Chita who is there. I was there not long ago. Padre José told me her story — and of her mother. Are you —"

"Dios! Have I a child? And he told me the child — that the child — died with — the mother!"

For a time the bandit lay silent, breathing hard in short, quick gasps, between set teeth. Then again he spoke: "You — you are — honest? Swear to me — you —"

"As I hope for Heaven," Belville replied nervously, "I will do what I can to serve you, if it have to do with Chita."

"In coat lining — quick — chart. Left side quick!"

Belville felt of the coat; there was something sewed in the lining. Ripping the cloth with his pocket-knife, he soon had it in his possession. It was but a folded paper.

"There," gasped the dying man, "ten leagues — west — Chilpancingo — chart — gold — pure, for you — one third for — Chita —promise —" He choked, but his eyes looked up appealingly.

Belville, half beside himself, whispered hoarsely, "I do — I promise!" Chita's father's face lighted with an expression of gratitude; then the light slowly faded from his eyes. There was a convulsive spasmodic movement or two; and the hard-fought battle was over.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ARMATURE

Plans for its adjustment.

BELVILLE was sitting on the edge of the platform in the same spot he had occupied on Sunday night, his eyes fastened on the "M" he had unconsciously started to carve there with such a trembling hand, going over in memory the terrible events that had followed.

Twenty-four hours had passed. It was Tuesday morning. The whole thing seemed like a dream to him now: the warning he had given; the fight at the station; the long, dark hours with the wounded man; the Alcalde's investigation; the funeral of the bandit, denied church rites and at which the only prayer that had been offered had been a silent one by Belville. But the dark stains on the unpainted office floor and the boards of the depot platform, that obstinately refused to be washed out; these, and the bandit's chart in Belville's pocket vouched for the reality.

Don Luis had done what he could. He had taken

Belville home with him to the rancho and had insisted that every night of the young man's stay at Bachimba should be passed under his hospitable roof. For this kindness Belville was grateful. But he loathed the Bachimba office and longed for the day when he would be relieved and transferred to some other station. Except when duty called him to his desk, he remained outside the room, on the platform within hearing of the instruments, but out of sight of those dark spots on the office floor.

"Ay de Dios!" Don Luis had exclaimed when he viewed the body. "It is Chico — the White Wolf!"

"Then you knew him?" Belville had asked.

"Knew him? Who in the country did not? Most have had cause to know him. Not that he ever did aught to me; but he was of the Apaches. Yet I remember hearing it told how on a time when the Apaches were out to kill that he quarrelled with Jeronimo himself to save the life of a vaquero; how another time he gave to a charity his last peso; how he befriended more than one. Of those who knew him many were his friends — but all who were not so feared him. It is well for every one the White Wolf is dead."

It seemed almost beyond belief that Chita, that beautiful, innocent child, could have had such a man for her father. But there was little room for doubt; and he had made a promise. The question was, how could he ever perform it? Chilpancingo was far to the south. Railroads extended most of the way; but there would be nearly three hundred miles by horse or afoot over the wildest mountains in Mexico; and after that undoubtedly a long search before locating the treasure.

The journey would cost a large sum of money. He could not think of going without Larry. Neither of them had enough left to carry them half the distance. They must save up a "stake," before they might start. That would mean a year of waiting.

Belville spread out the chart before him to study it more carefully. He had resolved to confide in no one until he had time to think it over and decide on some course of action. The chart was crude and conveyed but little meaning at first glance. Through its centre was an irregular, curving black line, somewhat like a distorted letter "S," with lighter lines running into its lower bend, and the letters "Rio n," probably indicating a river running

north. The lighter lines might indicate small rivulets. Near its upper left hand corner was something resembling a childish drawing of a bird, with the letters "AG" below it. An inch lower down was something that might have been intended to designate a tree. A straight line was drawn through these two objects, and extended diagonally across the parchment, passing through the nose of a human profile, touching a curious zigzag line that began and ended nowhere in particular, crossing the base of the "S"-like river, and ending just under the latter at a small circle which had spokes, like a wheel without a rim, and which capped a heavy black column. The rest of the chart was filled with what evidently represented hills. Along the river line were small crosses, which Belville concluded were intended to represent trees. In addition to the man's profile there were four lines beginning and ending nowhere in particular that seemed to indicate something important, but what it might be Belville could not even hazard a guess. What "AG" might indicate was also a problem. Of one thing Belville felt certain: the black column must indicate the spot where the treasure lay, and might also be meant to show a cavern in the side of a mountain.

There was no scale to determine distances, nor were any figures given. He had nothing to go by but this imperfect chart and the scant words of the dying man: "Ten leagues — west — Chilpancingo." With such slight data it might take a year of searching to locate it. More likely, they might never be able to find it.

All this was discouraging; but it did not cause Belville to waver in his determination to make the attempt. It was not alone the possibility of a golden reward that influenced his resolve. The fact that he had given his word weighed with him. He had made it his first rule of life always to keep his promises; and this had been no ordinary pledge. The circumstances under which he had given it made this doubly sacred.

Clearly the best thing for him to do just then was to write about it fully to Larry. He had received a wire from his chum announcing the latter's arrival at Juanita; but he had not been able to talk with him over the line. There was a repeating office between them, and only occasionally might they hope to be favoured with a through connection.

Securing a pad of paper from the office, Belville returned to his seat in the sunshine. First making

a careful copy of the chart, he wrote a full account of all that had occurred, and ended his letter by saying:

"You know, old fellow, what is mine is yours. If anything ever comes of this we shall be equal partners in it. I would start at once if we had sufficient funds. It will require a large expenditure. I doubt if five hundred dollars would be sufficient, though if we could total up anywhere near that sum I would say to undertake it at once. In any event, you must go with me, when the time comes. Let me know what you think of it. Write me a good, long letter, for I am lonely without you.

"Yours,

"BELVILLE."

He had barely finished the letter when the northbound train arrived. Greatly to his delight, for he had not hoped to hear so soon, it brought him the following from Larry:

"*Dear Bell:*

"If I had a home anywhere in the world, I'd say I was thoroughly homesick. As I haven't, I guess it's only indigestion. It's no wonder at all if I have that same, for I'm living on never-before-heard-of stuff that I spend half my time concocting and t'other half naming and trying to digest. You see,

it's this way: I start out with the best intention in the world to follow a simple printed receipt for manufacturing muffins; but when I open my Dutch oven and the finished article appears, I find something resembling a cross between strangled eggs and leather. The name I bestow on such a result is apt to sound like a cuss-word.

"You know I have reached Juanita, for I wired you my arrival. Do you recall the beautiful picture the conductor drew for us of the place when coming out of Chihuahua? Grand alamedas and plazas, palaces by a beautiful lake, fountains, orange groves, and all the rest—'Music of sweet lutes,' à la Prince of Como? My compliments to that conductor. He's a bigger one than I am; the biggest on earth. The construction train that brought me from Lerdo dumped me off at midnight in the middle of a vast desert; not a thing to be seen for miles and miles but sand, cactus and sage, and an occasional coyote. And there's such an awful lot of it in sight. That's the worst of it: there's no limit whatever in every direction, no matter which way you look. And my office: I wish you might see it: a box-sounder tacked to a telegraph pole. No joking; that's all there is to it. They've promised to bring me a box-car to-morrow and set me up house-keeping in style — but they promised that same the night I came; this is sure the land of 'Mañana.'

"The principal creatures that animate these vast

solitudes, if you're excepting me, are centipedes, and tarantulas, and I'm half scared to death by the varmints.

"I ascertained before reaching here that Juanita was the end of the wire; but I didn't know till I got here that it was the tag-end of creation. The rails are laid some thirty miles beyond this, and I'm told I'm to be a sort of 'movable feast,' making a jump each week or two, as additional wire is harnessed up, but that I cannot hope to catch up with the construction crew at any time; I must learn to play 'solitaire' with my lonesome.

"The tracks are being laid both ways, and the two crews are now not far apart. They are my nearest neighbours.

"All the water I have to use is brought to me from about two hundred miles north of here. A bath is an unknown luxury. It was lucky for me that the construction train had some grub it could spare, or I'd have starved to death.

"While you are rolling in the comforts of civilisation, think of me wrapped in my overcoat and a borrowed Mexican blanket, shivering under a sage-bush at night and feeding a camp-fire to scare off the coyotes that serenade me from dark to dawn — think of me, I say, as much as you like; but on no account wish to be here with

"Your cruelly buncoed,

"LARRY."

Evidently Larry would not regret a chance to leave Juanita; though the thought had not entered Belville's mind that Larry could hesitate to join him in his quest for the treasure. Friendship aside, it was just such an adventure as would appeal most strongly to Larry's volatile nature.

Larry's reply came sooner than he had expected. Two days later, the following Thursday morning, Belville received this message:

"Belville, Opr. BA:

"You're a brick. Saw wood. See you Saturday.

"LARRY."

Had Larry gone crazy? "Saw wood" meant, of course, to keep still and say nothing; but how Larry could see him Saturday unless he had resigned from Juanita; and what his coming could possibly effect, save to weaken their joint resources, were questions that Belville puzzled over with much dissatisfaction. Finally he put them from him, in vexation of spirit, and resolved to worry no more about it until Larry should arrive and supply an explanation.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ADJUSTMENT

A lesson in financiering.

BELVILLE awaited the arrival of Saturday's train from the south with considerable anxiety; but when Larue descended from it his delight at seeing his chum again was so great that he forgot, for the moment, the worries he had been indulging in and only thought of how good it was to have Larry back.

The train had no sooner pulled out than Larry walked him into the office and made him repeat the whole story, questioning him like a lawyer until he had rehearsed the minutest details. When there was nothing left to relate, Larue opened the key, called the Chihuahua office and sent the following message:

"R. B.
"C.
"Please relieve me to-night if possible. Must visit El Paso immediately on matter extreme importance. OPR. BA."

"What on earth!" exclaimed Belville.

"It's all right," said Larry cheerfully. "I have it all planned out; just you trust your Uncle Larry."

"But tell me what you mean, Larry."

"Just this: we won't plod along to get enough cash to take us to Chilpancingo and strand us there at the mercy of a lot of Greasers. We'll go back to Paso and tell our story to the honest man we know there. If Mr. Hamilton can't afford to take an interest with us and put up for the expense, he may know of some good man who will. That will save a long delay; for we must have at least a thousand dollars. More than that, it will gain us his advice, which, coming from a man who knows the land, will be worth a whole lot I reckon to a couple of greenhorns like ourselves, who intend to tackle such a harum-skarum adventure."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARRESTER

Of a downward course. Belville gets even.

IN view of the service that Belville had rendered, it was not surprising that his request, as sent by Larry, received immediate granting. On the following Tuesday the two youths were again in Paso del Norte, enjoying Mr. Hamilton's hospitality and relating to him their adventures.

Mr. Hamilton had heard the story of Belville's heroism from Mr. Bagnell, though for obvious reasons the attempt at train-wrecking had been hushed up and the knowledge of it confined, as closely as might be, to the higher of the railway's officials. Belville and Larue were cautioned not to make the matter public; for, Mr. Hamilton explained, it might have a bad effect upon the stock of the company and would shake the confidence of the travelling public, thus affecting the road's traffic.

That the story of the outlaw's treasure interested Mr. Hamilton there was no doubt whatever; but in

reply to Larry's request that he finance the undertaking, he answered evasively. "I'll promise to think of it, boys. Stay here at Paso with me for a few days; speak to no one about it; and by the end of the week I will give you a definite answer."

Belville agreed to this readily enough, but Larue chafed at the delay. It seemed unavoidable, however, and he finally settled down to make the best of it; in which Miss Lucy so noticeably assisted that Belville ventured to chaff Larry mildly about it. Larry did not recognise this as a chaffing matter.

"Belville," Larry said simply, and Belville had never seen Larry so serious before, "Belville, you wouldn't wound my feelings I know; and I wouldn't wound yours; so let me tell you, a girl like Lucy Hamilton is no subject for joking. There's nothing so good for any fellow as such a girl's society. It knocks spots out of one's angular ways. If I can persuade Miss Lucy to bestow enough of her time on me, it will make a gentleman of me."

On the fourth day of their visit Mr. Hamilton suggested a walk across the river to El Paso; and so it happened that the boys, guided by their host, once more found themselves inside the doors of the "Fashion."

Mr. Hamilton led the boys toward the back of the hall, glancing keenly at each man he passed, as if in search of some one. As they neared the rear of the gambling room, it was evident that he had succeeded. Sound asleep in a chair tipped back against the wall was a poverty-stricken looking man whose face was nearly concealed by his hat, but whose figure seemed strangely familiar. Mr. Hamilton walked up to him and touched his arm, and the stranger lurched forward heavily.

"How — what?" he stammered, in sleepy surprise. "Oh, yes; Mr. Hamilton! Scuse me! You see," apologetically, "I was fagged, sleepy — bein' as how I ain't breakwasted yet to-day. I hopes — "

He stopped abruptly and his face grew crimson as his gaze encountered Belville and Larue. The latter were quite equally surprised. In the worn, hungry-looking tramp they recognised no less a person than their old friend and partner, Tomson, of "Tomson's Gem Location."

"Now's a chance to get even, Bell," Larry whispered.

Mr. Hamilton said to Tomson with a smile: "I promised to do something for you, Tomson; and I have: I've brought you two old friends."

Tomson shifted uneasily in his chair, his eyes bent upon the floor; then he rose unsteadily, and the boys could not help noting the hollows in his cheeks and the tired stoop of his great shoulders. There was a moment of awkward silence, broken at length by Tomson.

"I reckon," he said, without raising his eyes, "I reckon as how I done ye, boys. 'Twon't do no good to say it now, p'raps, but I never meaned to do ye. I meaned to be fair an' square. I didn't say nuthin' 'bout a sale in prospeck, fer I'd had so many planned afore that that never come to nuthin'. I didn't say nuthin o' th' last one, for I feared as how 'twould pan out th' same. I didn't want fer to git yer hopes up an' then go an' dissapp'int ye. 'Twas just afore th' sale was closed ye funked on yer contrack. I ought a tole ye then, I know. But I didn't. Ye know th' rest. I sold th' 'Gem,' which the same didn't profit me nuthin'. Th' Tiger got th' boodle in short order — but that's neither hyar ner thar. I reckon as how I done ye an' I reckon as how I'm sarved out right. But it's hard, Mr. Hamilton —" Tomson looked up for the first time, "It's hard. Ye'd give me a power o' hope, w'ich is w'at I've lived on since yesterday. It's hard; but I reckon it's

sarvin' me right. I only asks that ye won't rub it in. I'll jest drop out peaceable like; w'ich I won't trouble no one no longer."

With the last words he shuffled past them and out through the billiard-room toward the door, his grey head bowed and his long arms hanging listlessly.

"Fate has evened that score," said Larue.

Belville turned to Mr. Hamilton: "Is he as badly off as he says? Has he really had nothing to eat to-day?"

"I only know," replied Mr. Hamilton, "that I ran across him yesterday and pitied the fellow. He looked as if he had starved for a week. I bought him a meal, and while I watched him eat it I got his story out of him. It didn't take long to find out that he was the man who had bested you in your Santa Fé venture. I thought you might like to see him again, so I made the appointment with him here to-day. I think he was really telling the truth when he said he had eaten nothing to-day. El Paso is a tough place to be broke in. There's no work of any kind to be had for such a man as that, and they've small use for charity here. Many a better man has starved here."

Belville did not wait for more. He bolted out of

the "Fashion," leaving them to follow as they pleased.

"What's he up to?" muttered Larry.

Mr. Hamilton took Larry by the arm and started after Belville. They reached the sidewalk just in time to see Belville disappearing into the next building.

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Hamilton. Leaving Larue, he walked slowly forward to where, through an open window, he could command a view of the interior of the building Belville had entered. Presently he motioned for Larue to join him. Larry did so, and peered into the room. At a long uncovered pine table that occupied the centre of the room Belville and Tomson were seated. Both had their backs to the window, but Larue could see that Tomson was eating and that Belville was talking to him as he ate. Then Belville's hand went into his pocket and it did not come out empty. He rose from his stool and laid a handful of silver beside the old man, patted him on the shoulder, leaned over and whispered a few words and then, with a handshake, left him.

As Belville appeared on the street, Mr. Hamilton and Larry joined him. "Bell," said Larry, "do

you remember what you said that day we found we had been buncoed? How if ever we ran across Tomson again, you intended to get even with him?"

"I think I have," replied Belville.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONNECTION

Repairing a break.

TWO days later Mr. Hamilton called the boys into his study and, closing its door behind them, said, " Boys, do you remember your friend J. S. R? I have a letter from him. I am glad to say that I have been able to verify all you told me of your past lives and that you are both highly spoken of by those who know most about you.

" Now, I am not rich by any means. A thousand dollars is a great deal to me. It is a sum that I could not afford to lose. But you will need all of that amount; and I have such faith in you that I am willing to speculate with you. It is a venture and all of us are taking long chances; I realise that fully; but put in what money you have and I will make up the thousand."

So it was arranged. An agreement was drawn specifying the terms of the contract and that two-thirds of the treasure, if found, should be divided

equally between the three of them, the remaining third, as all agreed, to be accounted for to Chita.

"Wait till you get to Mexico City," Mr. Hamilton advised, "before making any purchases for your outfit. And you had better register there at the British Embassy, for that will afford you as great protection as might a company of soldiers. These Mexicans have no respect for the average Yankee 'Gringo,' but they have been taught the danger of molesting travelling Englishmen."

"Must we pass ourselves off as English?" asked Larue.

"That would be the safest plan."

"Not for a man of Irish blood."

"Well, Larry," said Mr. Hamilton, laughing, "I'll argue that point with you later. There's another thing I must speak of now. I've given this matter a good deal of thought, and I must say with but little result until I fell in with Tomson. Neither of you knows much Spanish. It would be difficult for the wisest head to engineer such a trip as you are about to go on rightly, under such circumstances. Both of you may be brave and fearless, young and strong; but more than one occasion may arise where the services and advice of an old frontiersman who under-

stands the people and knows their language like a native would be of paramount importance.

"There is no doubt that Tomson is thoroughly ashamed and sorry for the part he played at Sante Fé. Nor is there any doubt that the manner of Belville's kind revenge has earned his gratitude. I pride myself somewhat on my ability to read character. I do not often misread a man. I feel morally certain that Tomson is not a bad man, and that he now would go through fire and water to be of service to you. He tells me that he is of English birth. That alone would ensure your protection. I want you to take him with you."

Larue had little faith in conversions; but he was manly enough to admit that Mr. Hamilton's broader experience entitled his opinion to the greatest consideration. He did not argue the matter, but when he found that Belville was rather pleased than otherwise at the idea of taking Tomson along with them, he gave in to the majority gracefully. The next day, therefore, found the boys, with Tomson as their henchman, on board of the express train and en route for the City of Mexico.

CHAPTER XX

THE RELAY

Between civilisation and the unknown.

SEVENTY hours after leaving Paso del Norte the three travellers found themselves in Mexico City. Their first care was to establish themselves at the Hotel Buena Vista, near the M. C. Ry. station. It was a cheap but clean and comfortable house built on the site of the famous battle, and less than a mile from the Zocolo, the central square of the city.

Their next thought was to see about preparations for their overland trip. "You draw up a list of what we should have," said Belville to Tomson; "you're experienced in such things."

Tomson demurred. "I ain't no typewriter. You all knows what ye'd like t' hev. Make yer list an' I'll go over it."

"I'll start the procession," said Larry. He took a sheet of paper and jotted down the following:

3 rifles and 1,000 cartridges.

3 revolvers, ditto.

3 sheathe knives.

3 blankets.

"There," said he; "I reckon that pretty well covers it."

"What are we to eat?" asked Belville.

"Do we foot it?" inquired Tomson. "Take a clean sheet an' put down these here:

"Three saddle hosses an' one pack hoss; three Mex. saddles with saddle-bags; four lariats t' tie th' hosses out; three rifles an' three huntin' knives; three blankets; three capotes to keep th' rain off an' save us from newmownhay; three pocket compasses to find ourselves with; th' best map money'll buy; a p'und o' terbaccy t' keep me from cussin; quinine fer chills; mustard plasters fer bellyaches; liniment an' arniky fer sprains an' hurts; lint an' bandages; a couple o' surgeons' needles; buttons an' thread; needles an' pins; a side o' bacon; a bag o' flour; some salt po'k; coffee; tea, ef ye like; twenty p'unds o' hard-tack; a kettle, an' stack inside her yer fryin'-pan, coffee-pot, plates, cups, an' small duds like knives, forks, spoons, pepper an' salt; a gold-pan — no knowin' what we may strike out thar — powder, fuse an' mercoory; a p'und o' candles an' plenty o' matches.

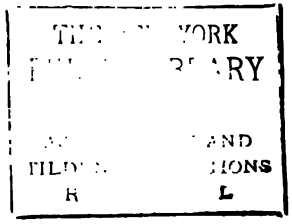
"Them's about all we'll actooly need; but ye kin add what other contrapsions ye like. Last, an' w'ich is th' fust thing t' see ter, we'll hev t' procoor a Injun guide, an' try 'im out t' see 'f he's honest."

Remembering Mr. Hamilton's advice, they visited the American consulate. They had agreed that they would speak of their destination as Acapulco, which was but a short distance beyond Chilpancingo and which would excite less curiosity, as Acapulco was the gateway of travel between Mexico City and Central America.

Upon hearing what they contemplated, the consul corroborated the wisdom of Mr. Hamilton's advice that they register at the English embassy and travel as English subjects. "The registered Englishman," he said, "is usually safe. It is probable that the mountain-men have their agents here to post them as to all travellers, for the English are seldom molested. The Mexican has learned that England protects and looks after her subjects. They have learned also that our own country is lax — it is hard to admit it, but it is true. Our country seldom resents with vigour the outrages upon its citizens abroad. There is a tragic commentary on the meth-

The Palace, Chapultepec.

Where the centuries meet: Montezuma's aqueduct, and a fountain of to-day.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ods of our government contained in the fact that of one hundred and sixty Americans who have started from here for Central America in the last twelve months, with promises to report to our consul at Acapulco, less than sixty are known to have reached that port. As one of you is really English, take my advice and register as such."

To this compromise Larry consented, and the matter was soon arranged.

The consul also advised them to go by the Morales Railway across Popocatepetl to Yautepec, its terminus, which would save them two days' journey by horse and where they could purchase mustangs and hire a guide much cheaper than in the City of Mexico.

The purchases which they decided to make here were all attended to before night. They spent most of the evening on the Zocolo, the great public square before the grand cathedral and palace, where they listened to the inspiring music of the Mexican Band, inhaled the perfume of the flowers, sipped frescas and pinas, and watched the interesting crowd of all nations that was there on dress parade.

As they were returning to their hotel they encountered a group of M. C. trainmen, with one of whom,

a conductor named Quigg, they had made acquaintance on their way south.

The following day was Sunday, the gayest day of the week in Mexico. They were rather glad that there was no Sunday train to Yautepec, for all of them were anxious to see more of the capital city. Quigg offered to be their guide, and he proved to be a good one. He took them through the National Museum, in the courtyard of which Huitzilopochtli, the hideous stone god of war of the Aztecs, was looking down at the huge sacrificial stone upon which, tradition has it, over seventy thousand victims were sacrificed in his honour. On the third floor they saw the most impressive object that the museum contained: the wonderful death mask of that most wonderful leader, Juarez, who was the "Washington" of Mexico. The quiet majesty and strength of that marvellous face, and its god-like kindness, are things no beholder of them will ever forget. And it is but a clay reproduction of the features of an Aztec Indian; would that those of the royal Montezuma had been similarly preserved.

Quigg next led them up the winding staircase leading to the bells of the cathedral where, from the belfry, they enjoyed a magnificent view of the city

and the surrounding mountains and lakes. Quigg pointed out Montezuma's calendar, a great circular stone covered with quaint hieroglyphics which was built into the wall of the church. It has since been removed to the National Museum, to better preserve it. Then they visited the president's palace, the government buildings, the mint, the opera, the alemeda, and the beautiful paseos. The latter were ornamented with numerous groups and pieces of statuary, and were thronged with gay caballeros, wives, daughters, and sweethearts, all on their way to the Plaza del Toros, to witness the weekly bull-fight. Quigg begged the boys to attend, but their cock-fight in Paso had sufficed to satiate their curiosity for similar spectacles.

As the crowning event of the day, Quigg piloted them to the Zocolo, where they procured tickets at his direction and started from before the National Palace in a luxuriously equipped car, with a competent and attentive guide in charge, who explained the points of interest as they whirled along.

Their first stop was made at Chapultepec, where their guide led them by the winding road through the marvellous gardens and by a gradual ascent to the palace-crowned heights, where a delightful surprise

was in store for them. Finding that the president's family was not in the palace, their guide prevailed upon its custodian to show them through the entire building. Every room in it was visited, and to adequately describe the treasures it contained would fill a volume. Combined with more regal splendour of furnishing than was to be found in any palace of Europe were touches of home-like comfort and modern conveniences such as very few of the European palaces possess. The walls were covered with priceless tapestries; there were carpets costing $10,000 to a room; there was furniture upholstered in genuine Gobelin, one set alone being valued at $60,000. There were exquisite pieces of statuary, marvellous silken draperies, private bath-rooms for each suite of apartments; and every room was lighted by electricity, the chandeliers, all specially designed, representing clusters of candles.

The view from each of the tier of balconies that surrounded the outer walls of the palace was beautiful beyond description. Far below, the great cypress-like ahuehuetls, their spreading branches festooned with drooping Spanish mosses, shaded the garden walks that wound in and out through luxuriant fields of flowering wild myrtle. These immense

trees were wonderfully picturesque, some of them attaining enormous size, having diameters reaching twenty feet and their branching tops stretching quite to the first balcony of the palace. Before them lay outspread the dome-dotted, tower-crowned city, the splendid Paseo de la Reforma leading from the foot of Chapultepec straight to the heart of the metropolis four miles away. Beyond were the beautiful suburbs, each adorned with ancient monasteries, churches and shrines, and back of these were the silvery lakes; the whole immense valley being set in a circle of towering mountain peaks dominated by the snow-covered volcanoes — a sight so beautiful, so sublime, that no eye on earth could weary of it; a sight once seen never to be forgotten.

In Chapultepec gardens was a monument to the Mexican Boy Cadets who fell there September 13, 1847, in their desperate defence of the palace against the assaults of our American army; and near the monument was the entrance to the cavern by means of which Montezuma used to disappear mysteriously from the palace, reappearing again on the heights at his own pleasure. His ability to do this caused his subjects to regard him as a supernatural being.

Leaving Chapultepec, they sped along through

Tacubaya, a suburb of princely residences of Spanish design, each with a marvellously beautiful garden; on past the hacienda built by Cortez; on through the attractive suburbs of San Pedro de los Piños, to Mixcoac, the summer home of ambassadors resident in the capital city, their guide pointing out to them the residence of each one, in a constant flow of fascinatingly broken English.

Their next stop was at the plaza of Coyoacan, a city older than Mexico, where Cortez chose his residence, and where they saw his house and the well in which he was said to have drowned one of his wives. Also they saw the cross he erected over her grave, and the church he built as a penance. They were tempted to wonder whether the multitude of churches all over Mexico was to be accounted for, in part, by the lack of adequate divorce laws in the old Spanish code.

Thence on to Churubusco, where their guide proudly informed the boys that four hundred Mexicans had held the church against the whole American army, until they had expended all their ammunition.

Then to Tlalpam, the summer home of the Governor of the Federal District, passing the immense lava deposits from the eruption of Ajusco, which

tradition says occurred seven hundred years ago.

Then in the shades of evening they turned their faces homeward, and, with the track especially cleared for the special train, they fairly flew back to the Zocolo.

They had enjoyed four or five hours of kaleidoscopic wonders, accompanied by constant, courteous attention; and all for two dollars Mexican money — one dollar of American gold!

"Was it worth while?" asked Larry, as they returned to their hotel; and Belville replied, "If it had cost us twenty dollars in gold it would have been money well invested!"

PART IV

PLUCK AND LUCK

CHAPTER XXI

A BIT OF INSULATION

The extremes of the Morales Railway.

OUR adventurers were awakened by their landlord early in the morning; and after doing justice to a breakfast of black coffee, bread and cheese, which he had made ready for them, they paid their bill, threaded the mazes of the Calle de la Miña, passed the Cathedral and Zocolo and, after walking about two miles through an uninteresting suburb inhabited by the labouring class, reached the Morales Railway station. They were thankful when the train of the narrow-gauge road whisked them away from the beggars who had gathered to importune them. It quickly carried them across the swampy ground between the two great lakes of the

basin and passing through sugar and coffee plantations soon reached an altitude where corn, wheat and potatoes grew. Here, in the shadow of Popocatepetl, the train paused for an hour to permit those on board to dismount and partake of a substantial breakfast at a wayside fonda; then it climbed on upward toward the towering cone which, covered with perpetual snow, glistened like an immense diamond in the sun's rays, yet whose chilling shadow seemed to freeze the pass below through which the train was laboriously crawling. By noon they passed the altitude at which cultivation of any kind is possible. Several small flocks of goats were seen, the goatherds lazily dozing in the sunniest spots. These were the only signs of life on the barren, lava-strewn hillsides.

At the snow-line they stopped for luncheon and for a siesta; and the train waited while its attendants, wrapped in their warm serapes, dozed for an hour in their hammocks; then, after a superlative effort, the summit of the pass was reached and the southern view burst upon them: hundreds of miles of mountains and valleys; silvery rivers winding between banks clad in rich forest greens; here and there small pueblos of white-washed adobes; churches and spires

in abundance, for each rancho must have its chapel; groves of gigantic cacti; thickets of ugly prickly-pears; and far away in the distance to the southwest and binding the blue horizon a faint, thread-like ribbon of deeper blue — was it imagination, or could it be the waters of the Pacific?

Then the fires in the engine were permitted to burn low and, purely by gravitation, the little train rushed down the long horse-shoe curves toward the Morales Valley. Wraps and blankets were soon thrown aside, and ere long they were again in the sugar-growing zone, where, after plunging from the cold mountain pass, the heated air seemed like a draft from a furnace.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, covered with dust and perspiration, they arrived at Yautepec, the railway terminus, more than a vertical mile and a half below the point of their midway siesta.

It was too late in the day to attend to any business, so our travellers had their dinner at a fonda and then lounged about on the stone seats in the plaza until nightfall. Although many miles distant, the snowy peak of Popocatepetl seemed very near; a marimba was being played somewhere off in the distance, far enough away for its weird, wild notes to

Descending to the Yautepec Valley, "Where the fires in the engine were allowed to burn low."

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suggest more civilised instruments; and the graceful, bare-legged, brown-skinned water carriers, coming and going about the fountain where they filled their jars, lent an attractive touch of novel life to the picturesque scene and rounded out its interest.

The sun dropped behind the mountains and darkness fell without warning. There was scarcely any suggestion of twilight; in a moment, it seemed, the stars were twinkling overhead, and near the horizon the Southern Cross was burning brightly. In five minutes it grew so dark that they could barely see to pick their way back to the little quartel where they had chosen lodgings, and in a short time they all turned in for the night. But Belville lay awake for hours listening to the strange cries of the Sereños, the guards who patrolled the streets from dark till dawn, each one of them a walking armoury and a terror to evildoers.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PLUGS

With a shock that was not electric.

IN the morning it quickly became noised about that three "Gringos" were at the quartel who desired to purchase horses. Before the trio had finished breakfasting a mob of vendors had gathered before the door, each apparently anxious to undersell his neighbours.

"You deal with them, Tomson," said Belville. "Be sure to select the best horses, and don't let them fool us on prices."

"You seem to forget," interposed Larry, "that I know a horse from a burro. I didn't grow up in the circus-stables for nothing." Whereupon, Larry proceeded to examine the animals submitted, and shortly decided that not a single one would answer their requirements.

"A worse spavined, knock-kneed, broken-winded lot of skyoots," declared Larry, "couldn't be found in America. There's surely better stock than this to

be found here — or we shall have to walk. Let's consult the landlord."

Accordingly, they sought el Señor, Daniel Lara, their genial host, through whose kindly mediation they procured four first-class mustangs, young and sound — at something more than their real value, perhaps, for kindnesses must be purchased and paid for in Mexico, as elsewhere; and no doubt their host stipulated with the vendor for a goodly commission on the sale.

After a bargain had been agreed upon, the boys were informed that they must visit a notary to have a bill of sale drawn; also that the plugs must be branded. Without this precautionary compliance with the law they would be in danger of arrest for defrauding the State of its legal dues. So the bill of sale was drawn, on papel sellado, paper bearing the official seal of the State; and by the time the notary had been paid for his work, the official paper purchased, the fee for recording paid to the town clerk, and the charge for the official branding paid, the boys began to gain an inkling as to how the revenues of Mexico were exacted.

All day long they had borne in mind the necessity of procuring a suitable guide and servant. Though

several had applied for the position and a few had been highly recommended to them by their obliging friend Daniel Lara, it was not until late in the afternoon that they found one with whom they were pleased. He was a small, wiry, young Indian, with no trace of white polluting his veins. Not such an Indian as is to be found in the States anywhere, but a round-faced, smiling, little fellow, with arms like a blacksmith's and legs like a bullock's, whose bright eyes and white teeth evidenced his perfect health, and whose square chin and strong, firm neck bespoke endurance. Whether he might prove honest was difficult to determine. He was one of the horse-vendor's servants and, from all accounts, had never earned acquaintance with the stocks and bastinado. That much was in his favour. He had travelled to Acapulco and back, and an Indian never forgets a trail; so there was no doubt he could guide them. The vendor offered to let him go if they would pay his debt.

"What is his debt?" inquired Tomson.

"He owes me a balance of one hundred and seventy pesos."

"We could buy half of Mexico for that," said Tomson, turning to Belville.

"Tell him we'll give him twenty-five," suggested Larue.

Tomson did so; and after much haggling a deal was closed and the horse-dealer parted with his peon for forty silver dollars. The notary was called into requisition again; so was the "papel sellado"; so was the registration clerk; and Pipo, the Indian, was legally made over to Belville and Larue, to serve as their chattel until such time as he should repay the debt. Whereat Pipo expressed his unqualified delight, though he anticipated but unending service.

"There's only one thing about the deal," said Larry, "that doesn't seem fair to all parties."

"What's that?" enquired Belville.

"Aren't we defrauding our friend with the government branding-iron? All the rest of the crowd had a whack at our pockets on this. Let's go and get Pipo branded!"

Their business concluded, they returned to their quartel, divided their traps, filled their saddlebags, and ascertained that the duffel remaining for the pack-horse was not so great but that it could be stowed for him to carry both it and Pipo. This decided, they went in to dinner, and as they were about to take their seats at table they experienced a strange

sensation. They grew unaccountably dizzy. The lamps suspended above their heads seemed to be swaying back and forth; then as they saw the cups and saucers, goblets and plates and other table furnishings begin to chase each other across the cloth, they feared they were going crazy. The landlord's wife rushed in from the kitchen with an hysterical cry that furnished an explanation. "Temblor! Temblor!" she shrieked, rushing for the outer door. The dishes rolled to the floor with crash on crash; the empty chairs slid about the room; and the boys, finding it impossible to keep their footing and reach the door, clung to the pillars supporting the roof and prayed that the latter might not fall upon them.

As the terrifying disturbance ceased, their dizziness increased and they felt seasick. Everything they looked at swam before their eyes. In a few moments, they managed to reach the narrow street outside the quartel, where they found Daniel Lara and his señora kneeling and uttering disjointed prayers. There was a wide crack across the thoroughfare where the earth had been split asunder by the shock, and the red brick paving before the quartel was covered with brown tiles shaken from the roof by the earthquake.

"That was frightful!" whispered Belville, in a voice of awe.

"What made it do it, at all at all?" gasped Larry.

"That?" said Tomson. "I reckon as how that was old Popo yander jest havin' a laugh at our expense over one o' yer Irish jokes."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CELL

With the release of certain prisoners.

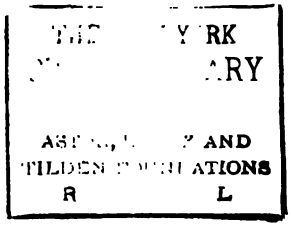
THE first rays of the rising sun were tinging Popocatepetl's snowy peak with crimsons, blues and golds, as the little cavalcade of four filed slowly out of Yautepec, on the road to Cuernavaca. In the valley all was still dark and they barely could make out the narrow trail; but as they began to mount the hills they emerged from the tropical jungle that clothed the bottom lands of the Yautepec River and came out of the sombre forest into the light of day.

For three hours they climbed steadily upward between great sandstone boulders overgrown with cacti, with little chameleons skurrying helter skelter across their path and occasionally startling a flock of gaudily feathered paroquets who, angry with the intruders, pursued them with shrill, discordant cries.

By the time they had reached the summit of the spur of the volcano over which their route led them

Entrance to Maximilian's Hunting-lodge.

Patio of Maximilian's lodge.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they were quite ready for a siesta; and there, with Yautepec, their starting point, behind them, and with Cuernavaca, the objective point of their first day's travel, both in full view, they "boiled the kettle," and rested through the heat of the day.

When they resumed their way it led them down several thousand feet into a deep ravine, across a rushing mountain torrent, then up the opposite slope. Reaching the summit of the second spur, they traversed a mile or more of trail that was easy travelling, only to round a jutting peak and find themselves on the brink of a precipice at which the trail seemed to terminate. At Pipo's direction, they dismounted and unsaddled the horses. By patiently pushing and pulling, with a great expenditure of Spanish oaths and Aztec adjectives by the indefatigable Pipo, the mustangs were persuaded to slide down and around a jutting crag that blocked their path and to clamber to a place of safety farther on where the trail widened. The packs were then carried to the horses, the horses resaddled and reloaded, and driven down before them into the Cuernavaca valley.

The valley had appeared quite level from their elevated view-point at the top of the precipice, and

this had consoled them with a hope of easier travelling; but as they drew nearer little mounds grew into formidable hills, and the dark lines of green between them proved to be forest-filled bolsas and huecos through which ran turbulent streams fed by Popo's ever-melting snows. Their surroundings changed rapidly as they approached Cuernavaca, and soon both sides of the way became tangles of tropical flowering and fruit-bearing trees festooned with brilliant orchids and parasitic mosses. There were multitudes of gorgeous blossoms, prominent amongst which were white and pink oleanders, magnolia blooms a foot in diameter, creamy "moon-flowers," masses of purple and magenta bougainvillæa, the latter so plentiful and luxuriant as to vie in magnificence with the wistaria of Japan, and roses of a score of delicate shades and hues. Here and there were glimpses of well-cultivated fields, yet no one appeared to be at work; the owners all seemed to be taking their ease in and about their small adobe and cane huts, from each of which, as the boys passed, came smiling greetings, "A Dios!"

"The owners," is said advisedly; for Morelos differs materially from all other Mexican States. Here there are but few large haciendas; therefore

but little peonage. The bulk of the land is held by the natives, whose small allotments have passed for centuries from father to son; possession, in the majority of cases, being the only evidence of ownership. Such titles might not satisfy the American investor, but they are recognised by the government of Morelos and are therefore sufficient for the natives of this land of seldom changing boundaries; grants near Cuernavaca made by Cortez to his soldiers being still in the possession of their descendants.

Cuernavaca lies among the foothills of the great volcanic cerro, and in places the road was so rough that, in mercy to the mustangs, the boys frequently dismounted and walked. Pipo had said nothing of the way, and they were so absorbed in the novelty of each passing moment that they failed to notice he was leading them somewhat astray. By making a slight detour, however, Pipo had an objective point in mind, and it came to them as an agreeable surprise. A partly ruined chapel of the days of Cortez, its blackened walls supported by flying buttresses, suddenly appeared at their left; in front of them marking a turn of the road was an old stone monument crowned by a stone cross; a cluster of small adobe dwellings timidly peeped from among the tangle of

trees; and at their right, facing the church, was a typical Spanish gateway, bearing the words above it, "Emperador Maximiliano." It was the entrance to the hunting-lodge of Maximilian and Carlotta. At sight of it, Belville promptly dismounted, as did the others, who quickly followed him inside the open gates. Here, surrounding the little court, were the quarters which had been provided for the guard of honour — a company of mounted Austrian Huzzars, whose elaborate uniforms and huge fur collars must have been ludicrously uncomfortable and incongruous in this land of perpetual summer.

Descending a gentle slope, they came upon the Lodge, an unpretentious building containing half a dozen rooms and an ample portico facing the south, from which a number of stone steps descended into an artificial pond completely hedged by oleanders: Carlotta's swimming pool. The principal apartment, opening upon the portico, was the one that had served as the imperial dining-room; and it had been here, one evening after dinner, that one of his nearest friends, a trained Austrian diplomat, had summoned courage to break to Maximilian the news that trouble was impending. Maximilian so thoroughly believed in the divine right of kings that

thought of personal danger was impossible to him. "Pouf!" he had replied, with a shrug of his shoulders; "it will disappear like that!" And he blew a ring of smoke from his cigarette.

The walls were bare and discoloured and the building was fast falling into decay; yet Belville sat there in the warm sunlight musing on what had been; and presently he heard the tinkling of bells and the patter, patter, of tiny unshod hoofs. Then through the broad gateway there entered a heavily laden train of mules and burros and a small army of attendants. The packs were unslung and, working like bees, with a low buzz of softly spoken Spanish, magically the bare walls were covered with priceless tapestries, the floors were hidden with oriental rugs, fragile furniture of the days of Louis XV graced the rooms, the sideboard groaned beneath its burden of silver plate, charcoal fires were kindled in the great kitchen, a haunch of venison was set to roast, old wines in rare cut-glass decanters were made ready for serving. Then, with a blare of trumpets, a more imposing pageant appeared. There was the jingling of arms and accoutrements and the clattering tread of a cavalry force that escorted a gorgeously gilded chariot of State swaying softly in its great leathern straps

and drawn by six gaily caparisoned mules, with uniformed postilions and footmen white-wigged and white-stockinged; and the picture was complete when Maximilian and Carlotta descended and entered the transformed Lodge.

The picture faded; Belville awoke from his dream, and the pathos of it all overpowered him for a moment. Only for a moment, however. He recalled the impracticability of it all; the mistaken fancies of this poor young Don Quixote of Austria; and he saw afar off the band of patriots headed by that stern old Indian warrior Juarez, struggling on the border against as great or greater odds than beset our own Washington a hundred odd years before, intent upon but one thing on earth: the Liberty of his Country. And Belville rose from his seat by the swimming pool with a tear of pity for the unhappy fate of the grief-maddened daughter of a king, and a sigh for the folly of her royal lover and husband, but softened by the thought that it had to be, that no other end was possible.

Out again into the sunlight as it filtered through the wonderful foliage, and the boys followed a footpath across the park, now grown into almost a jungle, to the stables that were the Emperor's. The

low adobe wall was deep in shade, and against it, burning like a sanctuary light to the memory of the former glory, was one great scarlet bell-shaped blossom, a solitary hibiscus. Elsewhere this beautiful tropical bush bore its hundreds of blossoms; but here, in the tragic shadow of the past, perhaps it lacked heart to bloom — or it may have felt that this one single perfect flower was a more effective tribute.

Then on to Cuernavaca: ranchos and plantations began to appear; cacti, wild-flowers and palms made way for orange and coffee groves; towering mango trees lined the trail, which had taken on itself the semblance of a road; stone walls reinforced the mango trees; and with a rush down an incline, a dash across a bridge and a scramble up a steep little bluff, the boys found themselves at a little plaza on the outskirts of the ancient pueblo, surrounded by a crowd of half naked youngsters and mumbling crones, and halted by a villainous barefoot soldier.

"What in thunder — " began Larue, but Tomson stopped him with a warning gesture.

"Shut yer eyes till it's over," whispered Tomson.

"Till what's over?" asked Belville.

"Don't ye see?"

The boys glanced across the plaza. Opposite them stood a vine-covered ruin, out of which came filing a score or more of dark-skinned, bare-headed captives, shackled together with iron chains, and with arms tightly pinioned to short sticks that rested at the small of their backs. Under direction of their guards, they ranged themselves against a low stone wall that ran beside the ruin, then turned and faced a small squad of barefoot soldiers in uniform.

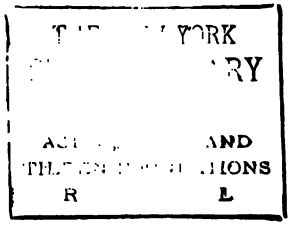
"Altencion!" The muskets gleamed in the dying light.

"Apuntase!" The guns were raised and aimed.

The boys scanned the faces of the doomed men, but could not detect the quiver of a single muscle; stolid indifference; that appeared to be all. Seemingly, the blood of their Aztec ancestors triumphed in that supreme moment. There was no fear of death in those unbandaged eyes that gazed steadily past their executioners, past the crowd of curious lookers-on, past the confines of the plaza, out into the dark realms of the unknown that were so soon to be opened to them.

"Fuego!" The muskets flashed; and as the reports reverberated among the neighbouring hills the boys turned faint and sick at heart. Belville, for

A Cuernavaca patio (Courtyard).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one, would have given much at that moment to have been safely back in Plainfield.

"What were they?" Larry whispered to Tomson.

"Insurrectos, I reckon," replied Tomson, guardedly; "better not be too cur'us. 'Taint sometimes allus healthy."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COIL

Which might have proved a tight one.

BELVILLE wished to remain for a day in this historic spot, which he knew had been headquarters both for Cortez and for Maximilian; but Larry said they were not tourists and that time meant money to them. They compromised on a visit to the famous "Salto del San Antonio," which might be made in an hour or two, and Pipo and Tomson went for the horses, which had been stabled at some distance from the hotel.

The cool arcades of the comfortable fonda, where they had found most excellent beds, faced the Plaza Benito Juarez. The plaza was surrounded by spreading Indian laurels, whose branches lovingly intertwined and under their dense shade was a broad walk of flags, bordered on each side by continuous iron seats. On the inner side of the walk was a low, neatly trimmed hedge of box. The square was cut

by diagonal paths, its centre was occupied by an octagonal band-stand, and in the remaining spaces were oleanders, magnolias, foliage plants, palms, and a glorious bougainvillæa, beneath which was a sward of blue-grass.

The picturesque natives, Indians, peons, vaqueros, rancheros, cargadores, vendors, rurales, gendarmes, pilgrims on their way to the Chalco fiesta, trains of loaded burros and mules, house-wives and their servants thronging toward the market-place beyond the plaza, all passed swiftly before the boys; yet so quietly, so unobtrusively, that the songs of the birds in the laurels seemed the sounds that most broke the silence.

It was marvellous, this absence of noise in a cobble-paved city of twenty thousand souls, in the very heart of which the boys were enjoying an almost cloister-like quiet. The soft-voiced people spoke their musical language only in low, sweet tones. Smiles abounded, but boisterous laughter never. The sandalled feet and the tiny unshod hoofs passed noiselessly over the age-smoothed lava paving, and no matter how congested the plaza, there was no jostling, no crowding. All moved with that unconscious grace peculiar to the Mexican people.

Three children were playing near the entrance, and their quiet enjoyment of their simple toys, their intent, bright eyes and subdued merriment, seemed to come from a deeper seated sense of pleasure than do the boisterous outbursts of Northern children. Their faces were not beautiful; their skins were dark and their features irregular; they possessed but two attributes of beauty: languorous black eyes and flashing white teeth; but the light of every fleeting smile transformed them into veritable cherubs. Belville noted their toys and wished that the Smith children at Plainfield might have seen them; a bead, a stray button, a bit of broken glass, a short stick — these were the total of their playthings. Their game consisted in juggling these with one hand, permitting each article alternately to rest for just a moment on the ground, the other three being kept in air. When the player bungled, the next child won the right to play, with the others as amused spectators.

"Estoy, Señores!"

It was Pipo with the horses. They were small, wiry mustangs, equipped with Mexican saddles and cruel-bitted bridles; they were not handsome, perhaps; but to single-foot was second nature to them, as the boys had learned the day before; and a

gently swinging canter was the only other gait they knew.

"Vamos!"

¡They mounted and made their way out of the Calle del Morelos, passing open portals that afforded fascinating glimpses of inner courts and gardens beautiful as dreams; past the plaza Antigua, with its quaint stone seats; out to the shrine of Guadaloupe. Here they turned to the left and cantered down a winding road between hedges of prickly-pear in bloom, with a wide vista before them reaching to the mountain tops thirty miles away and broken here and there by the white buildings of haciendas, near each of which rose its own particular belfry and dome.

A party of vaqueros had taken possession of a wayside cantina, in front of which their horses were waiting impatiently. One of the vaqueros was breaking a wild colt to the saddle, and as the boys approached the colt reared and fell over backward. Its rider lit on his feet like a cat, and as the colt scrambled up, he found the man again in the saddle. Then the colt tried bucking, instead of rearing, and the boys had a beautiful exhibition of broncho busting — not that of the Wild West show, but the gen-

uine article. The colt, finding the bucking ineffectual, made an unexpected dash for the cantina, plunged through its open portal, upset a couple of guitarists, and created a good-natured scattering among the vaqueros, who laughingly bantered their companion on his poor horsemanship. Noting for the first time that they had an audience of strangers, they decided evidently that they would make the exhibition worth while. A number of them mounted their horses and went tearing back and forth before the cantina at breakneck speed, just to give the strangers an idea of their horsemanship. They were armed with revolvers and lariats which they flourished as they rode. They were reckless of consequences, and they gave the boys a glimpse of the real Mexico, stripped of its thin veneer of modern innovation. It is only a question of time, probably, until the iron horse and the American invasion (peaceable or otherwise) shall crowd this picturesqueness off the map, and the "Woolly West" will then become a memory, surviving only on the stage.

The road led them across a barranca and doubled back along its crest, opposite the city, whose red-tiled roofs glistened like jewels in the white light of the

morning sun. The scene was Spanish to the core, until they made a short turn to the right into a narrow lane that took them to a mountain gorge which was almost a counterpart of the famous Rummel at Constantine.

The horses were taken charge of by a pair of fierce appearing bandits armed with guns and murderous machettes, one of whom laid aside his weapons and conducted the visitors down a steep winding path until they stood before the beautiful Salto. The flow of water was not great, as it was the dry season of the year, but the fall was worth while to see, a single perpendicular leap of about two hundred feet, from the basaltic bed of the barranca above into the cool depths of a dark pool far below; and with its setting of gigantic tropical ferns, that sprang from every niche and cranny, the sight was one of remarkable beauty.

Slowly the boys climbed back into the bright sunlight; the attendant banditti were tipped a small silver piece each and bade the boys a smiling and grateful "Adios!" Then onward, by a zig-zag path that crossed the barranca and afforded a number of wild and fascinating views, carried them past the Borda Gardens and the fine old cathedral, and so

back to their hotel. Here they paid their bill for their night's lodging, procured their saddle-bags and packs, and were soon riding past the picturesque palace of Cortez, once the home of the flower of Spanish cavaliers, but now a military barracks and prison. The boys glanced across at the little plaza that had been the scene of such a tragedy the evening before, and passed on to the market square which presented a novel picture of bustling, throbbing life. There were scores of mules and burros laden with ungainly packs of fruits, vegetables and firewood; there were tons of water-melons, pine-apples, bananas, oranges, pomegranates, hides filled with chocolate beans, coffee, indigo, peppers and herbs; tempting displays by the "carniceros" of veal, mutton, goat's flesh and beef, all stripped from the bones, for the butchers do not quarter nor disjoint their meats; and with these also were rows of hideous iguanas, great tree-lizards, ranged upon rush mats spread on the ground and most prized of all the meats offered for sale, their long, plump, muscular tails being esteemed a choice delicacy.

There were numbers of bright-eyed, barefooted girls in coloured rebosas or white camisettas, with strings of glass beads around their brown throats,

and who were sitting cross-legged upon the ground beside their shallow wicker-baskets that contained assortments of ribbons, beads, matches, flints, cheap jewelry, pocket-combs, mirrors, rosaries, cigarettes, razors, knives, and other trifling articles that comprised their heterogeneous stock in trade.

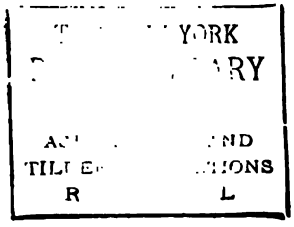
Here and there were old crones mixing tieste, baking tortillas or cooking meats for the hungry cargadores, who passed and repassed, wrapped in fantastically coloured serapes, or who busied themselves unloading the jaded beasts that stood patiently awaiting release from their cruel burdens. Through the motley throng barefooted soldiers wandered; and occasionally a military officer passed with clanking sword and jingling spurs, creating a divertissement among the group of ragged urchins who, in an unoccupied corner, were entertaining themselves with a game of "para-pinta."

To elbow through this congestion of life and plunge into the wilderness outside the town walls required but half a mile of riding.

So began the second day of travel. The trail led through a country less tropical than that of the day before. The hills were lower, but were more heavily wooded. They toiled over these foothills for hours,

with but a short stop for the mid-day meal; and quite late in the afternoon they came to a wide canyon, through which a small stream hurried. Before descending into it, Belville paused to watch the sunset. Was there anywhere on earth, he wondered, a more enchanting country, from a purely physical point of view; more picturesque mountain surroundings; fairer or bolder views; greater diversity of landscape; softer or more varied tones of wondrous colourings; skies of more translucent blue; or greater glory surrounding the departing sun? Every moment brought kaleidoscopic changes in the hues of earth and sky, revealing new and unexpected splendours. As the sun disappeared and the light faded, the mountains turned to silhouettes against the wide horizon, and above them all, seemingly touching the stars, stood Popo and his white-veiled bride, keeping ward over their dominions with a mute, unchanging patience that symbolised eternity. They had seen the prehistoric races come and go: the Toltecs, the Aztecs, the Montezumas, the Spaniards; from their ages of time it was all but as a passing show; the present was to them as naught; they were looking off into the future of centuries yet unborn, un-

Cathedral tower, erected by Cortez.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dreamed of by mankind whose finite minds catch but glimpses now and then of the unfathomable mystery of the mountains.

They found it quite dark in the canyon, and shortly, without warning, pitch darkness surrounded them. There was a terrific crash of thunder, and they barely had time to wrap themselves in their capotes before the rain descended. It was the boys' first acquaintance with a tropical storm. Larry declared that the ocean must have gotten out of bed and overturned upon them. Pipo encouraged them to keep on, assuring them that they would soon come to an Indian's hut, where they could obtain shelter. They reached it, only to find it occupied by a gang of armed men. An old hag squatted before a stone on which she was mashing a measure of corn with which to make tortillas. Near her sat a middle-aged Indian with his wife and three naked children. Evidently he was the owner of the hut, while the others were passers who had taken refuge from the storm. They all extended a kindly welcome; more kindly than sincere, Belville thought. But it was quite as safe to remain as to go on.

"They're a bad lot," said Tomson. "I'd give a

prospeck ter be out o' this deal. Howsumdever, as we're in fer it, th' only thing's to brazen it out. We must wait till they gits asleep; then try to slip out quiet an' comfort'ble."

The mountaineers, however, seemed to have no thought of sleeping. They had a skin of quarra with them, and as the night aged the strong drink flowed freely. Noisier and more boisterous grew their songs, louder and more reckless their laughter and their oaths. Through it all the boys and their two companions, stretched on rush mats near the open door, lay with revolvers ready at hand, striving to appear indifferent, but really in the throes of suspense, and debating, in undertones, the possibilities of escape from their predicament.

Suddenly, in the midst of a wild song, came a shrill cry, followed by a confusion of oaths and a general rising of the revellers. The boys saw two figures grapple, sway backward and forward for a moment, then fall among the embers of the fire. There was a flash of steel, and a form sped through the doorway, while a piercing scream rang out.

Tomson seemed to be the only one in the hut who had his wits about him. He sprang forward and dragged the wounded man from the fire, with his big

hands smothering out the flames where the man's garments were blazing.

"Agua, ye blitherin' fools!" he roared. Some one brought him water. The man was moaning feebly. Tomson examined the wound, then called for his saddle-bags. Pipo brought them. Tomson unpacked the medicine kit and with rough but ready skill sewed up the gaping cut in the man's side and bandaged it tenderly and carefully.

"Will he live?" asked Belville.

"Wall, yes; till he's hanged — shot, I mean. They don't hang much in this kentry. It's a good job fer us as how he will live. He happens ter be th' gang's leader. Ye kin all go t' sleep now in peace. Arter what I've jest did fer 'em they wouldn't tech a ha'r o' our heads, ef every one was carets fine. That thar job's a insurance policy which I reckon thar hain't none better."

Tomson had such faith in this opinion that he promptly stretched out on the hard rush mats and in a few minutes was snoring lustily. But the boys did not sleep that night. Not until the time when, in the grey light of dawn, they roused the two sleepers and took their departure, amid a shower of thanks and blessings, did they manage to breathe freely.

"We'll be troubled no more by mountain-men," said Tomson, when they were well under way. "Thar be other gangs cruisin' round yere, o' course; but that gang o' Pedro's th' main un they say; an' th' news o' last night'll travel. Ef it don't, I got this, w'at Pedro give me." Tomson showed the boys a musket-ball which had some hieroglyphics carved upon it. "Them fellers has a sort o' Free Masonry — w'ich thar ain't none freer, I reckon. That ball'll pass current, I opine, whar even di'monds wouldn't be no manner o' good. Considerin' w'at we may have afore us, I reckon I wouldn't sell this yere lead ball fer one o' them ole Spanish gold-mines."

CHAPTER XXV

THE BULL

One on Larry.

CLIMBING far above the clouds, over the worst piece of trail they had encountered, the little party of adventurers came to what, at first glance, appeared to be a flight of steps ascending some hundreds of feet higher. Such it really was, though one not fashioned by human hands. The feet of thousands of uncomplaining beasts of burden had cut those steps in the solid rock, leaving there a legible record of the commerce of ancient Mexico, when, unsullied by Spanish usurpation, the Montezumas were its kings. Where hundreds passed daily in the long ago, weeks and months now wear themselves away without a human sound disturbing the silence of the mighty pass, safe refuge for the hunted deer and tawny mountain lion.

The steps were climbed and another summit was reached, only to find that they must cross another valley lying thousands of feet below.

" It seems to me," Larry remarked, " these Mexican trails aim at all the highest peaks and all the deepest canyons, without the slightest regard to the comfort or convenience of the traveller."

That night they passed beneath the stars. Their camp was in a wild mountain gorge with cliffs rising almost perpendicularly on either hand and covered with fragrant flowering vines. Here and there needle-like cacti shot up to heights of fifty feet or more, and, outlined against the starry sky, seemed like giant fingers pointing heavenward. A purling brook tumbled over the rocky bottom, and on the bank of this little stream Tomson chose their camping place on an open, grassy spot beneath a tall madroño. The horses were tethered where they might graze, and a fire was kindled against a fallen tree that served admirably for a back-log.

Tomson was a capital chef, and was encouraged by the boys in the preparation of new dishes, ostensibly because of their desire for instruction, but really that they might stave off the evil time when they would have to do a share of the cooking. With Pipo's assistance, the old prospector soon had the supper ready; the principal dish being a ragout of wild turkey, one of these magnificent birds having

fallen a prize to Larry's rifle on their way down the canyon.

They did full justice to the delicious meal, and then lay down before the camp-fire, well wrapped in their blankets and capotes; but their sleep was broken and they were made restless by the strange noises of the night. An owl hooted in the branches of the madroño overhead; a mountain-wolf on the heights above barked sharply and pawed small pebbles over the brink to ricochet down upon them; then came the noise of some large beast taking to flight through the undergrowth — a deer, possibly, that might have been attracted by the flickering camp-fire. This was followed by a short period of quiet, portentous in its stillness, broken at length by a low roaring, that swelled till it became a shriek that reverberated from the mountain-sides, startling the boys and bringing them up all standing, clutching their weapons with trembling hands, and with wide open eyes that strove in vain to pierce the impenetrable darkness.

The terrifying sound finally subsided into a low, agonized moan, and died away among the mountain tops.

The two boys gazed at each other, speechless; then, by common consent, turned to their companions.

Pipo was sleeping like a babe. The mountain passes were his familiars; nothing there could trouble him. Tomson, though making no audible sound, was shaking as if with an ague.

"Tomson," gasped Larry, with chattering teeth, "get a move on. If that devil comes, let's be prepared for it."

Tomson rolled over, threw aside his wraps and burst into hysterical guffaws. "That — thar — cinocefalo!" he snorted. "Oh, Larry, me boy! I never took ye fer a funker! That thar was jest a howlin' baboon, a singin' his evenin' serenade under his best gal's windy!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BRACKET

Being somewhat parenthetical.

TOWARD nightfall of the fifth day out they came to a beautiful valley, well irrigated by acequias. Passing along a well-made road, between hedges of tall rose-bushes and geraniums, they were soon in the streets of Chilpancingo.

They secured lodgings at a commodious quartel that faced upon a gem of a plaza where roses were blooming in profusion and filling the soft air with their fragrance. It seemed delightful to be once more in clean beds; and as they lay down to sleep, Larry remarked, with a drowsy yawn, that he wished they might remain there.

"We shall have two nights of it, anyhow," Beville replied.

"How so? Aren't we going right on?"

"Of course; but to-morrow is Sunday, and we won't start out again till Monday morning."

"I'd clean forgotten," said Larry. "It seems

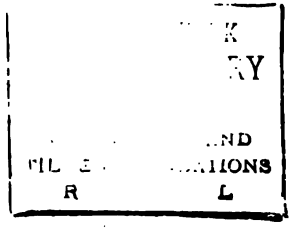
like a month since we left Mexico City. I've lost track of time."

Like all Spanish-American towns, Chilpancingo boasted a cathedral, and the boys decided to attend the Mass. As they crossed the plaza on their way, they encountered the prettiest spectacle that they had seen in Mexico. It was one of the church processionals; a "confirmacion," Pipo informed them. In the lead were a dozen musicians playing on strange instruments; and their music, though weird, was very sweet. Next came the priests and acolytes, carrying the Host from the altar. Following these were the young girls who were to espouse the church. They were dressed in short, white, flower-decked camisas which left their brown arms and shoulders bare, and around their brows were twined garlands of green leaves and snowy blossoms. The maidens bore on their shapely shoulders a heavy platform enthroned on which, in a bower of white roses, was a large statue of the Virgin. Behind came a number of coheteros, firing bunches of exploding rockets every little while. The sponsors of the children closed the interesting procession.

The spectators doffed their hats, many of them kneeling on the cobbles as the procession passed them.

At the fountain, Chilpancingo.

On leaving Chilpancingo.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Pipo, of course, joined in this, and Belville and Larry removed their hats. Tomson neglected to pay this tribute of respect, and received a lively reminder. There was no evidence of resentment until the procession had gone by; but then Tomson received an ovation consisting of a shower of sand, gravel and small stones which were thrown by the insulted populace. They knocked his offending hat from his head and peppered him smartly. After a moment's hesitation, he saw that the boys were laughing at him and fled incontinently before the storm, which pursued him to the door of their quartel.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BLUE-STONE

Not a "Red-letter day."

"TEN leagues — west — Chilpancigo!" The words were burned into Belville's memory. Ten leagues, thirty miles only, now lay between them and the treasure. It was not so great a distance but that it might be guessed to within a mile or so. With the aid of the outlaw's chart, which was safe in the money belt that he wore always about his waist, it surely would be possible to locate its hiding-place; then a short time to explore for it and, with it safely stowed between them, they would be able to bid farewell to the semi-barbarous country. Such were the pleasing reflections in which Belville indulged as they rode out of Chilpancingo that Monday morning.

They had explained nothing to Pipo beyond their desire to reach a point near the head of a small mountain river ten leagues to the west of Chilpancingo; and though Pipo had never been over the ground

nor could guess at the object of their journey, he troubled his brown head about it not at all, but unhesitatingly took the lead, to which position in the cavalcade he had become accustomed.

They hit upon a well-broken trail that led them in a westerly direction and followed it until noon, by which time they found themselves in the midst of a swampy jungle, with their trail dwindled to a cow-path and hundreds of the latter criss-crossing the forest in all directions. Instead of retracing their steps while they yet might, they plunged boldly onward, consulting their compasses occasionally and following such of the cattle-paths as appeared to lead them toward the west. It was not until late afternoon that they began to realise something was wrong. If their compasses and the maps which they had secured were reliable, they should have been near the Sierra Madre del Sur; but, instead, they were still in the midst of a swamp that seemed to have no ending. Although the sun was still high, but few of its rays pierced the dense foliage above them, and the forest was dark and forbidding.

For eight hours they had encountered no sign of a human habitation; but that there was abundance of life about them there was ample proof. Every now

and then a startled herd of wild cattle would go crashing through the undergrowth, and numbers of macaws would fly about them with hoarse discordant cries. It was the dry season of the year, but numerous stagnant pools and sloughs of filthy water testified to the violence of recent rains.

With no water fit to drink, no road to follow, and no idea of where they were, by nightfall their situation was scarcely enviable.

The only explanation that Tomson could suggest was that there might be a deflection of the magnetic needle, which might have led them to the northwest, when following its westward pointing. This seemed plausible from the fact that the map showed the river Palzas lying in a northwesterly direction from Chilpancingo, and beyond doubt they were in some large river basin.

As darkness descended, they selected as dry a spot as they could find, tethered the horses, kindled a fire, and prepared to pass the night.

There was no lack of company, myriads of mosquitoes, fireflies and bugs of all descriptions being attracted by the light of their camp-fire which, despite the insect pests it drew to them, they dared not extinguish because of the warnings they were receiving

from the throats of the forest prowlers. In addition to the dismal howl of the baboon, with which they were now familiar, the sharp yelps of the timber-wolves, the harsh croaking of tree-toads, the melancholy notes of palomas, and the lonely hoot of a great horned owl, their ears were treated at intervals to the purring of the Mexican wild-cat, which usually ended in a scream of terrifying harshness. These alone would have made them wakeful; but the puma evidently was not supreme in that wilderness of jungle. There were rumbling murmurs, like the sound of distant thunder, and more than once they heard the fierce snarl of the American forest king, the lordly spotted tiger of the Tropics.

The mustangs were as restless as their masters, and the hours were divided between quieting them and keeping the fire replenished. The night wore away slowly, until, with the first faint streaks of dawn that penetrated the jungle, they mounted and pursued their way through the apparently endless swamp.

The path they were following bore no marks but those left by the cloven hoofs of wandering cattle and the stealthy feet of the wilder things that followed and preyed upon them. It ran in anything but a straight line; and although they consulted their

compasses frequently, at every fork and turn, and so kept advancing, as nearly as possible, in a southwesterly direction, they seemed only to be plunging deeper into the fastnesses of the swamp.

They decided at length to follow the main trails of the cattle, regardless of direction, hoping that thus they might be led at last to one bearing evidence of having been travelled by human beings. About noon, their search was rewarded. Breaking through a thicket of underbrush and cane, they found themselves in a beaten trail where, in the soft slime, the marks left by human feet might be distinguished. This trail led them toward the north, and with lighter hearts they followed it. After a mile or two a little dry knoll appeared, upon which was perched a hut of thatch and cane. It was surrounded by an impenetrable hedge of slender, thorny cacti, through which was a small opening, and at their approach toward this a dozen gaunt dogs gave noisy warning, and an Indian appeared, gun in hand, and cried out threateningly, "Alto!"

Tomson explained the situation, and for a consideration the Indian agreed to feed the half-starved quadrupeds and to guide the travellers to the foothills of the Sierra Madre del Sur.

Entering the enclosure, they found it occupied by a young Indian woman and her child and two young Indian bucks. Their first acquaintance apologised for the nature of his greeting, saying, "There are many things to fear here. One must be on the alert always. It is no siesta, caring for the wild cattle in the swamp."

He turned toward the woman, who, at a command given to her in the jaw-breaking Aztec tongue, set about preparing a meal, while the young bucks unsaddled and fed the horses.

In half an hour they sat down to a dinner of fried eggs, wild hog's meat, frijoles, and coffee.

Larry was seated on a decayed log, drinking his coffee, when Belville noticed him start and hold up one of his hands with an exclamation. "Look here, Bell," he said.

Belville, bending over the hand, perceived a number of almost miscroscopic black specks swarming over it. The Indian came and glanced at the insects and, with the single word "Garapatillas," overturned his cup of hot coffee over them, scalding Larry ruthlessly. Larry jumped up in a rage and would have sought instant battle, had not Tomson restrained him.

"The Injun did ye a sarvice, Larry," Tomson said. "It was th' handiest cure. Them little beggars is deadly, once they gits in ter yer system."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CURRENT

Negatives and positives.

THE rest of that day and for nearly a week thereafter, they traversed the foothills of the Sierra, following more than one rivulet to its source in the mountains, yet finding nothing whatever that seemed to resemble the bandit's chart. They were nearly discouraged when, poring one evening over the oft-consulted parchment, an inspiration came to Belville. The curious lines beginning and ending nowhere in particular had been their greatest puzzle; but they had decided that these must indicate the profiles of the hills. To the letter "n," however, they had accorded slight study, agreeing with Belville's first theory that it must mean the north point of the compass. Now Belville suddenly viewed it in altogether a different light.

"By gracious, Larry," he exclaimed; "I believe we've been working all wrong. We've taken too much for granted. That letter 'n' after 'Rio,'

might mean 'north,' as we've always taken it to; but it might stand for the name of a river, which, in that event, might not be on this side of the range at all."

"That's so," agreed Larry. "What do you think of it, Tomson?"

Tomson turned his quid of tobacco reflectively. "Wall," he said, "we've s'arched this side o' th' Sierra for forty mile. 'Twon't do no harm to take a look in sight o' th' old Pacific."

After their experience in mountain climbing, it did not take them long to reach the summit of the nearest pass; and Belville and Larue never forgot their first sight of the ocean. Below them, after a steep descent, the foothills sloped gradually away toward the sea; afar to the west on a rocky cape nestled a group of shining white pebbles that they knew must be Acapulco, and out on the deep blue sea beyond a white winged vessel rose and fell on the bosom of the great Pacific.

Tomson assured them that all the west coast shipping was American; and they felt that that vessel was a connecting link between them and their native land. What that meant to them only you can know and understand who have travelled in foreign lands

and in some unexpected place have seen the stars and stripes unfurled, to show to you the real glory of "Old Glory."

Belville's guess proved to be a good one.

Descending from the ridge and estimating their distance from Chilpancingo to be about fifteen leagues, they worked carefully toward the east. On the second day of their Pacific slope search, they discovered a swiftly running little river that, ere they had ascended it far, made a sweeping bend around a high hill that possessed a wide, level terrace which fell away precipitously below it. As they rounded this and glanced further up the stream, the boys saw, full ahead of them, a hill that from their point of view presented to them a perfect human profile. They gazed at this, to them, startling object, for the moment speechless; then both exclaimed, "At last?"

Though Belville had the chart perfectly in his mind's eye, he got it out of his belt again and compared it carefully with the hills in sight that faced the mountain stream; then with a triumphant "Hurrah!" he flung his sombrero high in air, and Larry's quickly followed.

"Hold on," said Tomson; "whar be them trees?"

They looked at each other helplessly. The ravine, except for a few cacti and a tangled growth of tropical shrubs, was barren.

Then Larry saved the day. A few rods away his keen eyes detected something. Going to it, he shouted, "Here's what was once a big one!"

It was a rotten stump and nothing more. The fallen trunk of the tree had decayed to nothing.

"Ef that's yer big tree," said Tomson, scornfully, "an' thar ever war another like it, an' both on 'em stood yere when th' White Wolf stowed away his stuff, I reckon as how he war a pretty young man w'en he kim an' done it. He must a bin four 'r five hundred years ole w'en he got kilt."

"Never mind," said Belville; "we must follow it up."

Larry started his mustang off at a run and Belville trailed close behind. Tomson followed more deliberately. It was not the first search of the kind that he had undertaken, and from the result of the others he had but little faith in this one. Not that he had discouraged the undertaking; he had been too greatly in need of employment; and not that he had slighted any part of the work; but down in his heart he had felt all along that their chances of being re-

paid for their search were barely one in a thousand.

Beyond the hill with the man's profile was another that seemed to tally with the outlines on the chart, and when the boys beheld this they felt that the treasure was almost in their grasp. Larry galloped his mustang along, leaping it over clumps of cacti, in his eagerness to follow up the direction indicated by the chart. Belville was equally enthusiastic, but more considerate of his horse; and as he rode he took occasion to note all the surrounding hills that might aid them to verify the chart.

Pursuing a course in the line of the two hills, they soon crossed a rivulet, ascended a bank of gravel, and came to a halt before a precipice, overgrown with vines and creepers, that blocked their further progress.

Nothing daunted, they carefully redrew the line of the two hills and set to work exploring. The base of the precipice was carefully examined, for there they hoped to find a cave, that being their only explanation for the curious tower-like column shown on the chart. Finding nothing along its base, they undertook to climb the face of the precipice, in order to examine what lay above them. This was very dif-

ficult, however, and after Larry had received a hard fall through some of the vines giving way under his weight, they prudently decided to view it from below. Walking a short way out from its base, their eyes searched every foot of the face of the cliff minutely. Finding no sign of anything whatever upon it and having expended two hours or more in the vain search, they returned, somewhat discouraged, to Tomson.

Tomson had not gone chasing about like the others, but had sat still, smoked his pipe, and done some thinking.

"I'm o' the 'pinion," he said, "that ef th' stuff's yere at all, it's buried. Ef so be th' chart line's accurate an' fair, then yere, right yere's th' place ter dig fer it. That air line ends right yere next th' cliff. I've staked out w'at looks ter me t' cover th' groun' an' I suggests as how we begins excawatin'."

For two days they dug desperately, deepening the trench that Tomson had staked out and going down to bed-rock on it; yet they encountered nothing. Not a thing indicated that any portion of the ground had ever been disturbed before. In fact, there was nothing to evidence that it had ever before been vis-

ited by human beings. Utterly disheartened, they threw down their tools and held a consultation.

"I'm afraid it's a sell," said Larry; "or else we've stumbled on a place that's a twin to the one that cantankerous chart described."

"Sartenly," said Tomson; "we've gone fur 'nough to prove as how thar haint no treasure."

Belville had been lying flat on his back, gazing up at the cliff before them.

"Why don't you say something, Bell?" asked Larry.

Belville's reply was to rise, without a word, and still gazing upward, as if fascinated, he began to climb the cliff, with the aid of the treacherous clinging vines.

"Where in thunder you going?" cried Larry, his patience failing him.

"Here!" cried Belville triumphantly, disappearing from their view.

The explanation was simple: while lying on his back gazing at the cliff Belville had noticed a dark spot among the thick vines, and while watching it curiously, had seen a bat fly from it. Upon climbing to it and tearing apart the obstructing vines, he had discovered a small, cave-like opening.

Candles were quickly lighted, and as quickly the depth of the cave was disclosed, for the light penetrated to its further end. It was less than thirty feet in depth, rising a trifle in the first few feet and then descending at a sharp incline. The interior was full of bats, and warning hisses from unseen serpents caused them to leave it at a lively pace.

Providing themselves with stout sticks, they returned and attacked the inhabitants; and Belville still wears as a hat band around his old Mexican sombrero a part of the skin of one of the largest of the serpents. There was a round score of snakes to be killed; and while Tomson held the candles, the others threshed about with their clubs till their muscles ached and they were ready to drop with fatigue; for to keep from being bitten required much more agility than any of them were accustomed to indulge in.

The cave was cleared of its dangerous occupants in an hour or so, and they were then able to examine it thoroughly. Its walls they found were of solid rock; so was the floor, save that it was covered with the accumulated dust of years and with pieces of broken stone. They sounded every nook and corner, searching over every foot of it, hoping to be rewarded with a hollow sound that might indicate the existence

of a secret chamber. Nothing; absolutely nothing.

Tomson finally walked away to the entrance, disgustedly kicking stray bits of rock before him.

"I give it up," said Belville, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "Some one has gotten ahead of us, I guess. It's a terrible disappointment. The worst of it is, it's not our own money that we've sunk."

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," said Larry. "Remember, there's the cow still with us. Come, Bell, we might as well join Tomson outside."

Tomson was kneeling at the entrance, holding a fragment of rock in his hand. As the boys approached him, he struggled to speak, but words failed him.

"Never mind, Tomson," said Belville, sadly; "we're near broke, but no matter. We'll get back somehow to Paso."

Tomson flung his arms around Belville and hugged him like a grizzly might have done. "Belville," he shouted hoarsely. "Boys! *we've got Chico's treasure!* No — I'm not cracked — we've actooly got it. This yere's one o' them ole lost Aztec an' Spanish gold-mines!"

PART V

THE COMPLETED CIRCUIT

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SIGNAL

Wherein a chance is given to test it.

NOTHING more surprising could possibly have happened. The boys both knew, from Prescott's "Mexico," and from other books that they had read, that Mexico, under the early Spanish rule, had been rich in gold. They also knew that most of the sources from which that precious metal had been obtained had been lost to the world for centuries. That a knowledge of some of these old mines had been preserved by the Aztecs and transmitted by them to their descendants was nothing more than likely; and it was possible that the White Wolf, having befriended one of them, might through such a one have come into possession of the chart and the secret that it guarded.

With clear consciences and happy hearts they pro-

cured such tools as were needed and went to work energetically; for, as Tomson remarked, "Thar's no profit in raw material."

Cutting the bottom of the excavation they found a vein of hard whitish clay-like rock, which, though but a few inches in width, possessed a goodly showing of free gold in every pound of it, all of which was easily panned out in the rivulet below. From a neighbouring ravine they procured some timber out of which Tomson constructed a crude sluice-box. It was a primitive way of mining, but it paid well, and they were soon gathering their harvest.

Now, more than ever before, they appreciated Mr. Hamilton's foresight in urging Tomson on them. Though he had been of great value on the way, they now appreciated him at his full worth. Larry's suspicions had been banished before their start from Yautepec, and he, as well as Belville, now regarded the old pioneer with a true and deep affection. That Tomson was worthy of this and of every confidence, and that he heartily regretted the trick he had played at Santa Fé, he had proved to them many times over.

As for Pipo, his bright boyish face was a guaranty of honesty which they never thought to question.

He served them like a willing dog, and they treated him almost as an equal. Though he was nearly a man in years, he was as simple as any child; was amused at the veriest trifles, and took every hardship and task as a joke. Life was but play to Pipo. He was well fed, kindly treated. What more was there for which mortal could wish? If the work was hard and the hours of labour long, did not his masters labour as well? As they did not complain, why should Pipo?

So they laboured happily; day by day adding little by little to their store of gold, which soon began to assume goodly proportions.

"Ef we only had this yere in our kentry," lamented Tomson, "we could sell her out fer a million; but thar's no use a tryin' fer title down yere. Th' Greasers 'ud do us out o' it pronto, ef they oncet ketched a hint o' its value. We must jest keep a-pluggin' 'long, till we gits w'at we kin tote; then vamoose with it, and come back agin an' repeat th' op'ration."

All went well with them till a certain Sunday when they were resting and Belville announced that he intended to write to Mr. Hamilton. Tomson objected on the ground that there as no way to send a letter.

Belville maintained that Pipo could carry it to Acapulco. Tomson objected that doing so might get them into trouble. Belville ridiculed such an idea. Did Tomson distrust Pipo? Tomson denied any distrust; but from the way he did it, the boys concluded that Tomson, somewhere down in that big heart of his, was a little bit jealous of Pipo. The old prospector was overruled, the letter was written, recounting the principal events, and Pipo, mounted on Larry's grey, set off for Acapulco, commissioned to mail the letter and to purchase some supplies that were badly needed.

In the natural order of things, Pipo would return on the morrow; and the boys lay down to sleep that night without a thought of danger. An hour after midnight, however, their slumbers were rudely broken. They woke to find themselves tied hand and foot and absolutely at the mercy of the most villainous appearing gang that it had been their fate thus far to encounter.

"Gringos!" said the leader, smiling; "Muy bonitos Gringos!"

Paying not the slightest attention to their protests, the robbers picked them up like so many bundles and carried them out of the little hut that they had erected

for shelter; after which the camp-fire was built up, to provide a light by which to ransack the boys' belongings. Everything was broken into, and the boys, with sinking hearts, watched the rascals looting their saddle-bags and packs. It was only a question of time till the villains would discover their store of gold — for which they had risked so much, that had cost them such hardship and labour. Belville was ready to cry; not with fear, but with vexation. The personal danger in which he stood he had not bestowed a thought on, but to be thus balked in the very moment of success — to have written that letter to Mr. Hamilton, so full of enthusiastic details that it could not fail to kindle in his breast the greatest of expectations; and then to have their high hopes utterly dashed, all through their own carelessness in keeping no guard — How had the ruffians found them? Could it be that Pipo —

Ah, Tomson was talking to the mountain chief, and — why, Tomson would be able to get them out of the scrape; that musket-ball of Pedro's — the gauge that was to ensure them immunity — Tomson would have but to produce it, if Pedro were to be trusted!

Tomson had been talking vigorously in Spanish to the outlaws, and he finally secured the attention of their chief. In as few words as possible, he related their acquaintance with Pedro and his men, asserting that they were "Amigos," and that Pedro had assured them protection.

"Tal vez," said the chief, impatiently; "have you no token?"

"That I have," replied Tomson. "It is there in my coat — the inside pocket."

The chief picked up the garment indicated and searched it, closely examining each article he found. The boys waited trembling with excitement. There was a short piece of fuse; a bunch of sulphur matches; a black pipe; a tobacco pouch; a couple of nails; a jack-knife. After removing these things, the mountaineer turned the coat's pockets inside out and shook the garment contemptuously.

Tomson's face grew pale. "The ball," he cried in Spanish. "Search for the ball — it must be there!"

"Basta!" said the chief, angrily. "Here, Lopez! What shall they pay us for this lie? Is shooting too good for them?"

The plight of the three Americans was perilous. It was no longer a question of treasure, but a question of life itself.

"It's all that cussed Pipo!" muttered Tomson. "He's brought this crowd down on us. Wouldn't wonder ef 'twas a put up job from th' fust. That thar hoss-trader mought a bin in with th' gang, an' this yere Pipo jest traded t' us ter dummy us along! Reckon as how he's off down th' ravine thar now, afeerd t' come up yere tills thay've shot us — hangin' roun' t' git his share o' th' boodle!"

"Stow that," said Larry, "and let's try to figure out some way of escaping. Can't you suggest one, Tomson?"

"Yes, one way: sky'ard. It's th' only one left, as I kin see."

There was an interval of silence. Tomson was calling up his stoicism; Larry was wildly turning over futile plans for getting away; Belville's thoughts, strange as it may seem, were thousands of miles away; for he was thinking of Plainfield.

The robbers were dividing their spoils. Ere long some excited shouts announced discovery by them of the treasure. This was followed by much whispering amongst them. Evidently there was some ques-

tion in dispute between their chief and his lieutenant.

Presently Lopez came over to where Tomson and the boys were lying and, with a leer, said, "So! It is gold! It may be we shall not kill you — not yet; you would make fine peons, not? You would rather to work the gold, than to die? Is it not so, Gringos mios?"

The boys had acquired sufficient Spanish to gather the purport of his speech, but they left it for Tomson to reply.

"I'll think about it," Tomson said slowly. "I could think better if I had a smoke. Be a good fellow, Lopez — just for once — fill me my pipe for me, will you?"

Lopez grinned, showing his white teeth. "You like, eh?" he said. "Well, it is little enough, for a man who with dawn, may smoke forever!" Chuckling over his well-worn joke, he picked up the pipe and the tobacco pouch which the chief had dropped beside Tomson's coat, and leisurely proceeded to comply with Tomson's request. As he opened the pouch, it capsized accidentally and its contents scattered over the ground. There was something besides tobacco. Lopez stooped and picked that something up; then called to his chief excitedly and handed

to him the thing he had found. The chief held it up in the firelight, and the prisoners, watching with straining eyes, and with hearts beating wildly, beheld their salvation: the carved musket-ball that Pedro had given to Tomson!

CHAPTER XXX

THE JAR

Containing a shake-up.

THE chief hesitated but a moment; then he turned to Tomson and said apologetically: "You have been badly treated, Señor, but I will make amend. Loose them, Lopez."

Their revulsion of feeling was so intense that the boys could not conceal their emotion; but Tomson had experienced too many narrow escapes to exhibit very much concern, whatever he may have felt. If there is one thing the old Argonaut holds in esteem it is philosophical endurance of suffering and peril. Any fault will be more readily condoned by him than cowardice; and to him the greatest virtue is stoical endurance of hardship and indifference to danger.

Tomson could pardon the boys' emotion, for they had borne the brunt of it bravely, and on such an occasion as this release a couple of unseasoned Tenderfeet might not be expected to behave like old

campaigners; but for the veteran of fifty years' experience to accept their release as anything out of the ordinary would be, from the veteran's view-point, inexcusable.

Therefore, when Lopez had stricken off their bonds, Tomson lit his pipe and took a deep puff of the fragrant smoke with evident enjoyment, before addressing any one. Then he turned to the bandit chief.

"I don't thank you so much for this," he said, "as I do our good friend, Pedro. May I trouble you for my bullet?"

The mountaineer promptly handed Tomson the musket-ball, with the words, "Not only the ball, Señor; everything shall be restored to you. In spite of what is told of us, there is honour among us Insurrectos of the mountains. No mountain man is untrue to his friends. The one who has such a token as yours is free to enjoy and to journey where he pleases. You are a friend of my good friend. Should occasion arise when you may need help from the mountain-men of Guerrero, you have but to ask it; it will be yours. Can I say more?"

One question Belville had been longing to ask. He could restrain it no longer. "Señor," he said,

" our boy, Pipo — was it he who told you how to find us? "

The mountaineer smiled grimly: " No; your Pipo did not tell."

" Come with me," said Lopez; " you will see."

There was something sinister in the manner of the reply, but Belville followed fearlessly as Lopez strode away.

" Shall I come, too? " asked Larry.

" No," Belville called back. Though he had not implicit confidence in the good faith of his guide, he realised that there could be no immediate danger, and felt that a show of confidence might have a good effect.

The half-breed lieutenant led him down the stream a short way beyond the big bend of it to a small grove, into which he plunged. Following closely, Belville beheld Larry's mustang tethered to one of the trees; but there was no sign of Pipo.

Lopez hesitated, perplexed, and bent over to examine one of the tree-trunks. He was rising with an exclamation of surprise on his lips, when, from the branches over his head, a heavy body descended upon him, knocking him to the ground and pinning him there. A knife blade flashed in the grey dawning,

and Belville, clutching wildly at the upraised arm, caught it as it was descending.

"Mal de Dios!" cried Pipo, for it was he, struggling to retain his advantage over the half-breed. "Let go — that I may kill!"

"No, let be; we are friends!" Belville commanded; and Lopez, exerting all his strength, threw the frenzied Pipo from him.

"Why would you kill him?" asked Belville, wrenching the knife from Pipo's grasp.

"For the lashes he gave me," answered Pipo, sullenly.

Belville turned to the half-breed. "Why did you lash this poor boy?"

Lopez shrugged his shoulders. "Did not El Capitan say to you the boy would not tell?"

"Then how did you come upon us?"

"Mustangs have feet; they leave a trail. More, you had a camp-fire. Now let me find how the boy escaped."

"Escaped from where?"

"From the tree where I, myself, tied him."

"Wolves have teeth," said Pipo, grimly.

"But the knife — you had none when I searched you."

"I saw it was useless from the first — I flung it from me."

"But," said Belville, "when you had freed yourself, why wait in the tree?"

Pipo picked up a bit of thong. "Mira!" he said. "Would you chew that in two by to-morrow? I was but for one moment free when I heard some one returning."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE OPERATORS

Wherein Pipo gets even.

THE mountaineers left them toward noon, with many assurances of good will; but they did not feel that they were safe, and became much more circumspect in their actions.

Pipo had been dispatched again with the letter to Mr. Hamilton, containing a brief account of what had transpired since its first attempt to reach the post; and though Pipo had returned in good season the following day, bringing the supplies they needed, and their work was continued as if nothing had happened, they did not make as rapid progress as before, as Tomson insisted that some one should be always on guard.

At the extremity of the tunnel they erected a wall of rock in such a manner that, unless it were carefully examined, it would be taken for the natural wall. Behind this they took up their quarters, concealing in it everything of value and leaving only enough ar-

ticles in their hut to maintain the idea of its occupancy in the minds of possible visitors.

The nights were divided into watches, in which way a constant vigil was maintained; and waking or sleeping they were never without their weapons.

After the first week, their vigilance might have relaxed, had it not been for a visit which they received from the scowling Lopez. He expressed a desire to visit the mine and they did not dare to refuse him. Fortunately, the floor of the tunnel had been cut quite across in sinking the shaft, and access across the opening to the portion lying back of the cut was difficult, so the thought did not occur to the half-breed to explore the depth of the old excavation.

Lopez did not remain long, and upon his departure they dispatched Pipo to the nearest pueblo to obtain a supply of pig-skin sacks. These they filled with water, and, with an additional supply of provisions, stored them away in the tunnel's depths. After this, they breathed more freely; for in case of attack they would be able to withstand an indefinite siege, as one man posted at the tunnel's entrance would be able to defend it against a score.

Meanwhile, their store of gold steadily increased. Their shaft grew deeper, day by day, and so, daily, it

became more difficult to raise the ore and work it. Tomson finally suggested that they drive in another tunnel from about the level of the stream, at an angle which, while following the vein, would intercept their slanting shaft.

Tomson, who in his pursuit of gold had ranged everywhere between the Cape of Good Hope and California, explained to the boys that the vein appeared to him to be similar to the "Mulligy Leaders" of Australia; that if it really were the same, the gold-bearing ore would lead, eventually, to a vein-swell, or pocket, of richer ore; after the exhaustion of which the rest of it would probably prove to be barren; that their chances of striking this richer ore, if it existed as he imagined, would be greater by driving the new tunnel; that at all events the new tunnel would materially lighten their labour.

Accordingly, the course of the vein was carefully studied, and the new tunnel was started some rods down the stream. The rock through which they had to drive yielded readily to blasting and they made such good progress that in a fortnight they had driven in to a point that should have intercepted their slanting shaft. Their engineering had been faulty, however. By a series of careful measurements, they

concluded that they had gone several feet wide of the mark. They had gained little gold from the ore of the new tunnel, the character of which had convinced Tomson that his opinion was correct and that the pay ore would soon "peter out." For this reason, they regretted that they had not stuck to the shaft. Two weeks spent under such nervous pressure, besieged as they were by fears, was a serious loss, and they decided to renew operations on the shaft, where the ore paid them better.

It was at this juncture that an event occurred which served materially to hasten their operations. It was toward the end of the third night watch, about two o'clock in the morning. Pipo was on guard at the entrance to the mine, and was congratulating himself that it would soon be time for him to waken Larry, who was to relieve him.

Pipo was seated cross-legged on the ground, leaning back against the wall of the tunnel, with Belville's rifle across his knees, when his sharp ears caught the sound of a snapping twig. Pipo was alert in an instant. Moving noiselessly to the verge of the cliff he peered down into the darkness. Something was moving slowly over the bank of gravel. It made no noise and in the dark was but a darker shadow that

appeared and disappeared, as it slowly traversed the uneven ground. Less keen eyes than those of the Indian boy very likely would not have discerned it at all. Had one of the others been on guard and discovered the moving shadow under such circumstances, he probably would have cried out, "Alto!" and the shadow would have disappeared in the darkness. Not so Pipo. Pipo, if he gave it thought at all, thought only to prevent the shadow's escape. He watched it long enough to make sure that the objective point of the shadow was their hut, in which most likely they were supposed by the shadow to be soundly sleeping. He waited till the shadow mounted a little hummock, then cautiously slid a pebble down the cliff. At the slight sound, the shadow paused on the summit of the hummock. Pipo did not hesitate. He levelled the rifle, took quick aim, and fired.

The three Americans, roused by the shot, rushed from their bunks, weapons in hand. They waited a few moments, straining eyes and ears in an effort to discover whether or not there were other shadows. There was no sound in the dark ravine but the impatient snort of a mustang.

Belville was for abandoning the mine and trying

to get out of the country with what gold they had, before the bandits should attack them. He thought it the only prudent course to pursue, and that they might return with a stronger force to finish their mining, such a force as might cause the bandits to respect them.

Larue also was for getting away. "The scoundrels only let us go in the first place because they thought we would be laying up gold for them. It's too tropical a country," he concluded, "for a white man to live in."

But Tomson did not agree that such a course would be either prudent or profitable. "A little more work, an' we'll know ef I'm right. We kin lay that vein open an' prove ef it leads t' a pocket. S'long's we gits rid o' Lopez an' sticks t' our work I opine as how they won't attack us. That sartenly stands t' reason. It's t' their profit not ter. Near's I kin reckon, we've got 'bout seven thousan' o' dust. Ef so be as how thar's a pocket, it's apt t' more'n double that thar. A few more days'll finish th' job; an' ef so be I proves t' be right, we won't hev t' let in a lot o' skins, ner come back t' ther infernal kentry."

Tomson's arguments carried the day, and the boys agreed to be guided by his advice. They redoubled

their precautions, however, and worked like beavers at their task.

It was on the second day thereafter that they had another visitor. It was none other than El Capitan himself. Professing only a friendly interest, he examined the new tunnel, the shaft and the hut, and asked them if they had seen Lopez, with whom he said he had quarrelled and parted. Upon their expressions of surprise, he again renewed his friendly avowals and took his departure.

Fearing that they might have to withstand a siege, they dispatched Pipo over the pass to lay in an increased stock of supplies and ammunition. At dusk they saw him returning up the ravine, but he was not alone; there was a stranger with him. Imagine their surprise and delight at the totally unexpected pleasure of beholding in this stranger their friend and associate, Mr. Hamilton.

"I'd about given up hope of finding you," he said, when their greetings were over. "I've been hunting this neighbourhood for a week, with a guide from Chilpancingo; but we couldn't locate hide nor hair of you. I had about concluded to return home when, by mere accident, I ran across your servant. I was with the keeper of the quartel in one of the tiendas,

when Pipo came in and the boniface pointed him out to me as your man. I had the deuce of a job to persuade him that I really was a friend of yours. He wouldn't even admit that he knew you, until it occurred to me to show him your letter. He seemed to recognise that, and said he would lead me to you. I can't understand how you ever managed to discover this place nor how you managed to keep yourselves so utterly unknown to all the natives."

"That's our worst trouble," said Larry; "we're not that same, worse luck; as you'll find out too soon, I reckon."

"Why, day before yesterday I fell in with a gang of mountain-men — ugly looking fellows they were — not four miles back of here in the hills. They seemed to know nothing of you."

"That is easily understood," said Belville; who then explained all that had occurred.

Mr. Hamilton listened with deep interest, fully appreciating their anxious situation; then he commended Tomson's wisdom and congratulated them warmly.

"You certainly have had some remarkable escapes," he said, "and have come through like heroes. I'll pull off my coat and turn to with you. We'll

soon prove whether Tomson's guess is right; then get away from here as soon as possible.

"I have some news for you now that I think will interest you. Your letter was received but a few days after my return from my annual vacation. Where do you think I spent it this year? In no less a place than Conejos. There was nowhere else in particular that I cared to go; and my interest in our silent partner finally decided me to look her up. It was fortunate that I did so, as it turned out. Else we might have had as difficult a job to locate her as you have had to find the mine.

"The old Padre welcomed us cordially — did I say that Mrs. Hamilton and Lucy were with me? But he froze at once when I asked to see the girl. It was not until I had told him the whole story, so explaining why we wished to know her, that he was willing to grant our request.

"He seemed greatly affected by the news of his nephew's death. He had brought the boy up in childhood, he said. He seemed to have loved the scoundrel dearly. He did not attempt to excuse his crimes, but he impressed it upon us that Chita in no way resembled her father. We needed no assurance of that, once we had seen her. One glance at her

face is sufficient to prove that she inherited none of the nature of Chico.

"Now comes the queer part of it all: the Padre, who had seemed hale enough during our afternoon visit, was found dead in his bed the next morning — a stroke of apoplexy, likely. There was a smile on his lips — which Chita said she had seldom seen wear one; and if his life had been unhappy, his end certainly was peaceful.

"There was no other mission near from which a brother priest might have been summoned. I was rather glad of it, for had another priest been called, it might have complicated what I at once planned to do for Chita.

"I said nothing to the child about my intentions until after the funeral, at which I officiated as priest — we westerners have a fortunate knack of turning our hands to anything. When it was all over, we told her the truth, as delicately as possible. We did not, of course, let the child know of her father's villainy. That was not necessary. She need never be told. But we told her how Belville had witnessed his death — she remembered perfectly your visit to the mission — and we informed her of the commission he had bequeathed to you. Upon our sugges-

tion that she go home with us, she readily consented. So Chita is now under our roof, and she and Lucy have become fast friends. They share their studies and their pleasures. They both, with Mrs. Hamilton, sent you their love; and I hope it will be but a short time now till we are back with them in Paso."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CALL

A close one.

MR. HAMILTON was as good as his word. Though but a slight, thin, nervous man, he proved to be a wonderful worker; and with his assistance they progressed much more rapidly than before his welcome advent.

Nothing of moment occurred until the fourth day after his arrival. Belville and Larry were doing their morning turn in the shaft. Belville was holding the steel and Larry was wielding the hammer, humming one of his songs and keeping time with the strokes he made:

"Drill, ye tarriers, drill!
Drill, ye tarriers, drill!
For ye work all day
Widout sugar in yer tay;
When ye work, ye must work —
No time fer play —
Drill, ye tarriers, drill!"

With the last word, Larry hit a tremendous blow and jammed the steel.

"Never mind," said Belville; "I guess it's deep enough. Get the steel out, and we'll put in a blast, anyhow."

The hole was soon cleared and the blast tamped down, after which, touching a match to the fuse, they climbed to the tunnel above them, and waited outside the entrance until after the explosion. As soon as the smoke cleared away, Belville again descended. Lighting his candle, he glanced around. Then he rubbed his eyes and looked again. Then he uttered a joyful exclamation: the pocket that Tomson had predicted was found. He was standing upon a bed of pure gold that lay there, warm and yellow; a bed that would treble and quadruple the amount they previously had extracted!

"What's up, Bell?" Larry called, from above. "Why don't you fill up the bucket?"

Belville replied quietly, "Tomson was right; we've struck a tremendous pocket."

Though here was a hundred weight of gold to be wedged out and moved aloft, by noon they had it all taken out. It did not require washing. It was an immense nugget of pure gold.

Consumed with the lust for more, they slaved all the afternoon like Trojans, and through most of the

night and the next day they kept up the same mad, ruinous pace. But as Tomson had prophesied, not another ounce of gold did they gain.

Exhausted at length, they ceased labouring, and sat down to discuss what they should do. Should they try to make off at once with their treasure; or should they continue the work, sending Pipo out scouting to learn the outlaws' whereabouts, in order that they might select some different route and so slip away unmolested?

Though they abandoned the hope of finding very much more gold, they concluded that the latter was the safest plan. If they could reach home with what they had, they felt that they should be content. It was difficult to estimate what it might be worth, but they knew that what they had was a fortune, and that it was about all that they could comfortably carry away with them.

An hour before dawn, Pipo set off on his errand. He had barely passed the hut, however, before he turned and clambered back to the tunnel. Rousing the sleepers, he whispered: "Señores! Señores! The mountain-men!"

They had just time to rub the sleep from their eyes and to take up positions at the entrance, ere they

were able to make out the forms of men stealing noiselessly down the ravine toward them.

"Save yer fire," whispered Tomson. "Wait tills they git t' th' hut — then each one o' ye pick yer man. Me, as I'm furthest t' th' right, t' account fer th' one as is in th' lead — th' rest o' ye pick 'em in th' order in w'ich yere standin'."

As nearly as they could make out, there were perhaps a dozen of the mountain men. They were not so unevenly matched, considering the advantage of their position in the tunnel's entrance; and the bandits were armed with muskets, while the boys had repeating rifles and large calibre army revolvers, with which they could fire with considerable accuracy.

The plan outlined by Tomson might have made their numbers more equal, had it not miscarried. Larue, in his eagerness, leaned too far out of the entrance and precipitated a small rock down the face of the cliff. The effect was instantaneous: every mountain man disappeared in a twinkling behind boulders and bushes.

"Cuss th' luck!" muttered Tomson, drawing Larry back into the tunnel — only just in time, for the bandits had made him out and they fired a volley at him pointblank.

Pipo noted the musket flashes and promptly responded with his rifle; to such good effect that the bandits abandoned their positions and, under a fusillade from the tunnel, fell back up the ravine to a point where they could obtain better cover and still command the entrance to the mine. That they did command it fully was early demonstrated.

Hearing nothing more from them, Belville essayed to slip out to attend to the mustangs, which were picketed before the hut, between them and the bandits. The mustangs, though provided with food, were without water. But no sooner had he begun the descent than a dozen balls struck the cliff round about him; and thanking his lucky stars for their poorness of aim, he dodged back into the tunnel.

"I suggest," said Mr. Hamilton, as the day wore away, "that we make an effort to draw their fire and then charge on them. With the muskets which most of them have we might catch them before they would have time to reload."

"Bell has a better scheme, I think," said Tomson, who for some time had been smoking in silence.

"Then why doesn't he spring it?" asked Larry.

"Wall, it's this way," replied Tomson. "He suggestered it aw'ile back; an' I've bin a-smokin' it

over an' lookin' at it from all four sides, w'ich is a manner o' speakin'. 'Pears t' me as how mebbe it'll work out."

"Let's have it then."

"Wall, here 'tis. Ye 'member as how we figgered that thar new tunnel all wrong, an' reckoned as how we'd failed to connect by a couple o' yards 'r so. Now t'other day El Capitan took a look in thar; but he never guessed how clost we'd come to j'inin' these yere two tunnels. He'll never think t' guard t'other one, as is well around th' bend in th' cliff, out o' sight from whar they be, an' hasn't a blessed thing in it. Ner will he ever think o' us bein' sich fools as ter desart th' mine 'ithout our hosses. Now ef we could work oursel's in thar, a-keepin' up a demonstration from this yere, so's he won't git onto w'at we're up to doin', I reckon as how we could fool 'im."

"A good idea," said Mr. Hamilton, "if the connection could be made. The question is, how can we possibly locate the proper place in the shaft to begin the work?"

"We can't no more'n try," said Tomson.

Leaving Lary and Pipo on guard, the others descended the irregular shaft that, following the irregularities of the vein, dropped almost vertically a few

feet, then slanted acutely to the south, pursuing a "fault," descended again more perpendicularly, leaned again toward the south lower down, and probably ran beneath the new tunnel.

They selected what they estimated to be the likeliest place and began sounding the wall carefully in all directions. In a short time they were rewarded by what seemed to be a slight difference in the sound and, giving the wall a thorough testing, soon assured themselves that the new tunnel lay somewhere before them.

They muffled the top of the shaft, to lessen the possibility of the "Insurrectos" hearing them at work and so guessing the nature of their design. Then they went at their task and laboured as they had never laboured before. The air in the shaft was not of the best and the heat was something fearful; but they stripped to the buff and faced it, wielding the sledges with might and main, till the steels could go no deeper.

"The report of the blast," said Belville, "is what we have most to fear. They must not hear it."

"That's easy," said Mr. Hamilton, reassuringly; "we have plenty of ammunition; and from the time that the fuse is fired until after the explosion we must

keep up a racket with our guns, in the reports of which we may hope that the noise of the blast won't be noticed."

Never did Tomson put in a blast so carefully as he did that one. In trembling expectancy they awaited the result, firing at random up the ravine, as Mr. Hamilton had suggested. It seemed an interminable waiting. Larry concluded that the fuse must have gone out. When he felt that he could stand the suspense no longer, he slipped back into the tunnel and ventured down the shaft to investigate. Clinging to the guide rope, he reached footing at the bottom of the first vertical descent, but it seemed to give way beneath him. There was a stunning report and a concussion that threw him from his feet and precipitated him on down the incline.

Belville and Tomson slid down the rope at once, in their eagerness to ascertain the result and half way down they collided with Larry who, as eagerly, was making the ascent. This collision again knocked Larry from the rope and again he rolled into the incline, where Belville lighted on top of him. Picking himself up, Belville asked excitedly, "Has it made the connection?"

"Guess it has, from the shock I got," dolefully

replied Larry. "It's proved me to be the connecting link. I'd be a good study for Darwin."

Tomson appeared with a light, and the result of the blast was examined. Several tons of rock had been loosened and the wall back of the blast appeared cracked, but there was little sign of a connection with the tunnel. Belville threw himself down, disheartened, but Larry secured a steel and began sounding the wall and prying off the rock that had been loosened. Then he cried, "Out o' that, ye tenderfoot! Listen, Bell, will ye? Th' tunnel!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE METAL

Without which all circuits would fail.

THERE was no mistake. They were on the right road. But a thin wall of rock remained between them and possible freedom. Working with renewed hope, they soon made an opening into the new tunnel, and were provided with an avenue of escape.

Placing Belville on guard at this new entrance and with Pipo and Larue posted at the other, Mr. Hamilton and Tomson set about dividing the gold into five equal portions. These they packed in pig-skins, cutting up the empty water-bags for that purpose. By midnight all was ready for the hazardous attempt.

The five packs, weighing nearly forty pounds apiece, were provided with shoulder-straps, and might be slung and unslung quickly. Loaded with these and with a small supply of food, their weapons and ammunition, they stole stealthily out of the new tunnel.

The stars were shining brightly overhead and the Southern Cross was blazing, full of heavenly promise. Not a breath of air was stirring and the faintest sounds were magnified. Up the ravine, but a hundred yards away from them, the "Insurrectos" were dreaming of their plunder when they should have starved out the Gringo miners. The boys distinctly heard their sentry humming snatches of a Mexican love-song. The slightest noise, the snapping of a twig, the displacement of a pebble, or a stumble, might precipitate a conflict now with fatal results. Knowing this, in spite of their burdens and their anxiety to widen the distance that separated them from the singing sentry, they walked as if treading on eggs, proving the resting-place for each foot, before putting weight upon it. Their progress was necessarily slow, and it seemed hours to the boys before the welcome bend in the river was attained.

It was fifteen leagues of hard travelling to the haven of Acapulco; but these fifteen leagues, principally down hill, were easier to traverse than the ten leagues of mountain trail that lay between them and Chilpancingo. Besides, should they reach Acapulco safely, they would be out of the brigands' country and able to go by steamship direct to some Cali-

fornian port. This latter consideration alone would have decided them, and they headed for Acapulco.

By daylight, the hour of which varies much less in the tropics than it does farther north, spurred by the constant fear of a possible pursuit, they covered more than a third of the distance, and found themselves so exhausted that it seemed to them impossible to proceed any farther. Pipo, however, encouraged them to continue. "Only for one mile more," he urged; "that will be very much better."

They demanded that he explain the reason why; but Pipo could be obstinate when he wished. He would make no other reply than, "It will be very much better."

The boys and Tomson favoured finding some spot where they might lie in hiding until nightfall and rest. This would not have proved a difficult thing to do, as they were travelling through a dense forest; but Mr. Hamilton would not consent to it.

"Let us follow Pipo's advice," said Mr. Hamilton. "He is familiar with the country. You are perfectly sure that he is to be trusted. He has his reasons, and he says that it is a mile farther that we should go. He knows more than, for some reason, he will disclose, but I have faith in him."

So, in obedience to Mr. Hamilton's desire, they trudged onward, the weight of their burdens seeming tons. Larry said that had he been alone, with no one to shame him, he would have chucked that nightmare of gold and rid himself of the terrible load that threatened to break his shoulders.

On they stumbled along the trail that, with every step, became worse and more difficult to travel. It led them into swampy ground where they slushed through pools of water. More than one of them caught his feet in trailing vines and measured his length in the mud. That last mile of Pipo's through this jungle seemed endless; but by pluck and perseverance it was at length traversed and they came out on the bank of a shallow, rapid stream.

"Wait you here," said Pipo, dropping his pack and darting off up-stream at a pace that argued he was as fresh as ever. The others watched him enviously, and sank down on a fallen tree-trunk, thoroughly played out.

Pipo was, or seemed to be, a long time absent, and they were becoming anxious about him, when Larry uttered a shout: down the stream in mid-current Pipo was returning, and, joy of joys, he had a boat!

"I did not tell you," said Pipo, as he landed,

" for I was not sure; I feared to disappoint you. But it is very much better, not? So, if the mountain-men follow us, it will be no more tracks they will find."

" How did you get the boat, Pipo? "

" I took a small nugget of gold from my pack. Nugget of gold will do much, Señores, with a peon cattle-herder."

They loaded their packs on board and then stretched themselves out full length on the boat's flat bottom and let the current bear them away under Pipo's guidance. The jungle was quickly left behind and they came to a stretch of water where the banks were lined with graceful cocoanut palms. Here Pipo ran the boat ashore and, procuring a number of half ripened nuts, split them open and passed them around. The heat had become intense, for the sun was high in the heavens and they were nearing sea-level; but the sweetish milk of the nuts was as cold as if drawn from shells of ice; nothing could have been more refreshing.

Further on, they plunged over a rapid, through which Pipo skilfully steered the boat; and shortly afterward it began to drift between coffee and sugar plantations.

They took turns at sleeping through the day — all but the indefatigable Pipo, who held his place at the steering-oar and would let no one relieve him.

Near nightfall Pipo ran the boat ashore, roused the sleepers and, pointing down a well-travelled road, said "Two leagues to Acapulco!"

Thoroughly rested, they resumed their packs, abandoned the boat that had served them so well, and with light and hopeful hearts, undertook the last stage of their journey. The road was good, and its hills were as nothing to limbs as well seasoned as theirs had become. At nine in the evening they registered at a civilised hotel and ate a civilised supper. Nor, when they lay down in comfortable beds, did any of them neglect to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. Even Tomson, the hardened old Argonaut, was heard to mutter sleepily, "God bless that thar little cuss Pipo!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MESSAGE

From one end of the line to the other.

" On Board SS. *Colima,*
" Off Mexico, Feb'y 14, 18—.

"DEAR ELSIE:

" It has come to me with something of a shock that this is Saint Valentine's Day, and that a year ago I promised you a valentine when the Saint's Day should come round again. Moreover, before I left Plainfield, I promised that you should hear from me.

" I am tardy in fulfiling both promises; but though tardiness may be equal to neglect, I can tell you truthfully that mine has not been caused by forgotfulness. I have thought of Plainfield and of my friends there very often. I have no excuse except that the days have been so full of incident, labour and danger, that I scarcely have realised how the time has flown.

" This, probably, is the last place on earth from which you might expect to hear from me — though

if Larry were asked, he would say that at present we are a long way from being on earth at all.

" When this reaches you, you will wonder how we came to be here. To tell you the great news all in a lump: we are on our way home with a fortune. Perhaps it is not quite a fortune, but it is a good many thousands, anyhow; enough so that our shares will give to each of us a good start in life.

" How we got it is a long story that I will reserve for your future entertainment. The short of it is that we have been mining gold in Southern Mexico. Though we have had to endure many hardships and perils, I feel that it has made men of us.

" Larry, dear old chap, still is with me. I could have done little without him. Of course you will remember Larry, who was with me at Plainfield just before I left the Land of the Free, and with whom I came to that Land of Slavery, Mexico. You would feel sorry for him if you could see Larry now. The steamer is plunging along over the waves, and Larry is beside the rail and says he is looking for the nearest land. It lies about a mile straight down below us! The poor boy bore up bravely at first; wouldn't admit that he was sea-sick; but I came on deck unexpectedly and caught him hanging over the side. 'Hello, Larry! What's up?' I asked. Larry grinned a sickly grin, and answered, comprehensively, 'Everything!'

" There are three other good friends with us: a

Mr. Hamilton, who is the salt of the earth, our firm friend, our partner in the mine, and, when he's home in Paso del Norte, a high official on the Mexican Central. Number two is a dear old garrulous prospector named Tomson, who has stuck to us through thick and thin, and who, now that he has made some thousands, intends to stop playing faro and deposit his money in some safer bank; after which he will go to railroading with us. The last of the three is Pipo. You would like Pipo tremendously, I know. I wish that you could see Pipo. Strong as an ox; faithful as a dog; innocent as a child, is Pipo. He is a young Aztec Indian Peon, whom we redeemed from slavery in the pueblo of Yautepec. We all think so much of him that we are taking him home with us and are going to give him an education.

"We shall return to Paso from 'Frisco after we have sold our gold to the mint. Mr. Hamilton has promised to make me assistant train-dispatcher when we get back. I had thought of going to college; but the position he offers is such a very good one that I do not feel I can afford to throw it over. My 'trick' will be an eight hour one, so I shall be able to find considerable time to pursue the studies of which I stand most in need.

"Larry is promised an agency, and seems very happy at the thought of getting back to the old key and sounder. Between ourselves, perhaps the prospect of again meeting Miss Lucy Hamilton, whom

he greatly admires, may have something to do with it.

"My love to your father and mother, and a kiss to each of the little ones. Tell your mother that Mexico is quite a different sort of land from what her grandfather pictured, and that we still have our ears and noses.

"The *Colima* is a coasting vessel, touching at all important ports between Panama and San Francisco. Our next place of call will be Guaymas; and as that is a railway terminus, I hope to be able to mail this letter there. It will be ten days or more before we arrive at San Francisco, and if you write to me at once your letter may reach me. I will call at the post-office there and enquire for mail, before leaving; though I promise not to be greatly disappointed should I fail to hear from you. The western mail service is not the best in the world, and it may be a longer time than I think before you receive this from

"Your old friend,

"MAURICE BELVILLE."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CUT-OUT

Which is merely the author's "O. K."

IT was a long time indeed before Elsie received Belville's letter; but it was not the fault of the western mails.

It was more than a year later, during Belville's vacation, a part of which he was spending at Plainfield. They were looking over the interesting things that he had brought with him from Mexico: the costume of a mountaineer, serapes, rebosas, pictures made from the plumage of birds tastefully pasted together, pieces of Aztec pottery, Mexican drawnwork and laces, bits of silver filigree, and other curious odds and ends; it was while examining these, I say, that Elsie received Belville's letter; for when showing them his old leather money belt, he came across it, carefully folded with the outlaw's chart in one of the pockets.

"And Chita?" asked Elsie, when Belville had finished recounting his adventures.

"Chita and Lucy Hamilton are at college together. They will return home for the holidays, which will gladden more hearts than Larry's. Larry has risen faster than I. While I still am assistant dispatcher, Larry has secured the station agency at Paso — or 'Juarez,' as they call it now. He and I room together at Mr. Hamilton's. Tomson has charge of a section crew, and keeps bachelor's hall for Pipo, whom he is sending to school in El Paso, and whom he has practically adopted, though we're all of us his 'God-fathers.'"

"And all this," said Mrs. Smith, beaming, "has come about just because you used the Ground Wire!"

"Also," Belville added thoughtfully, "also, I guess, because I managed, somehow or other, with Larry's help, to resist a good many temptations."

THE END

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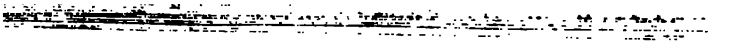

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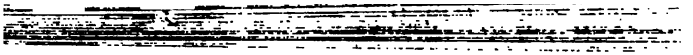

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